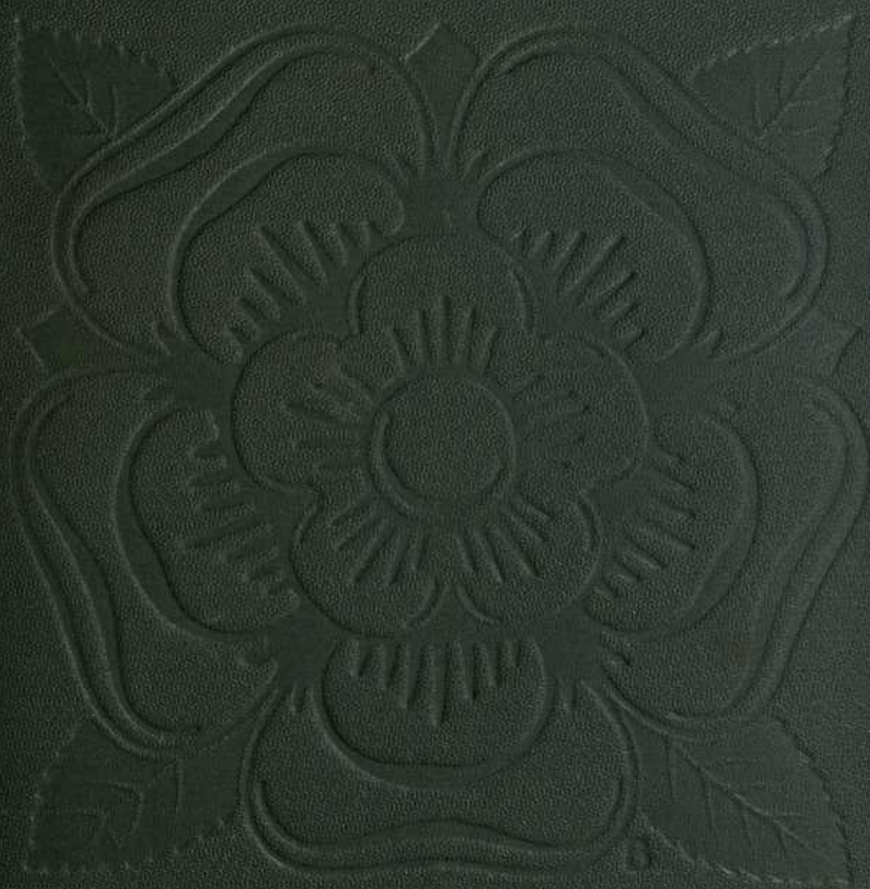
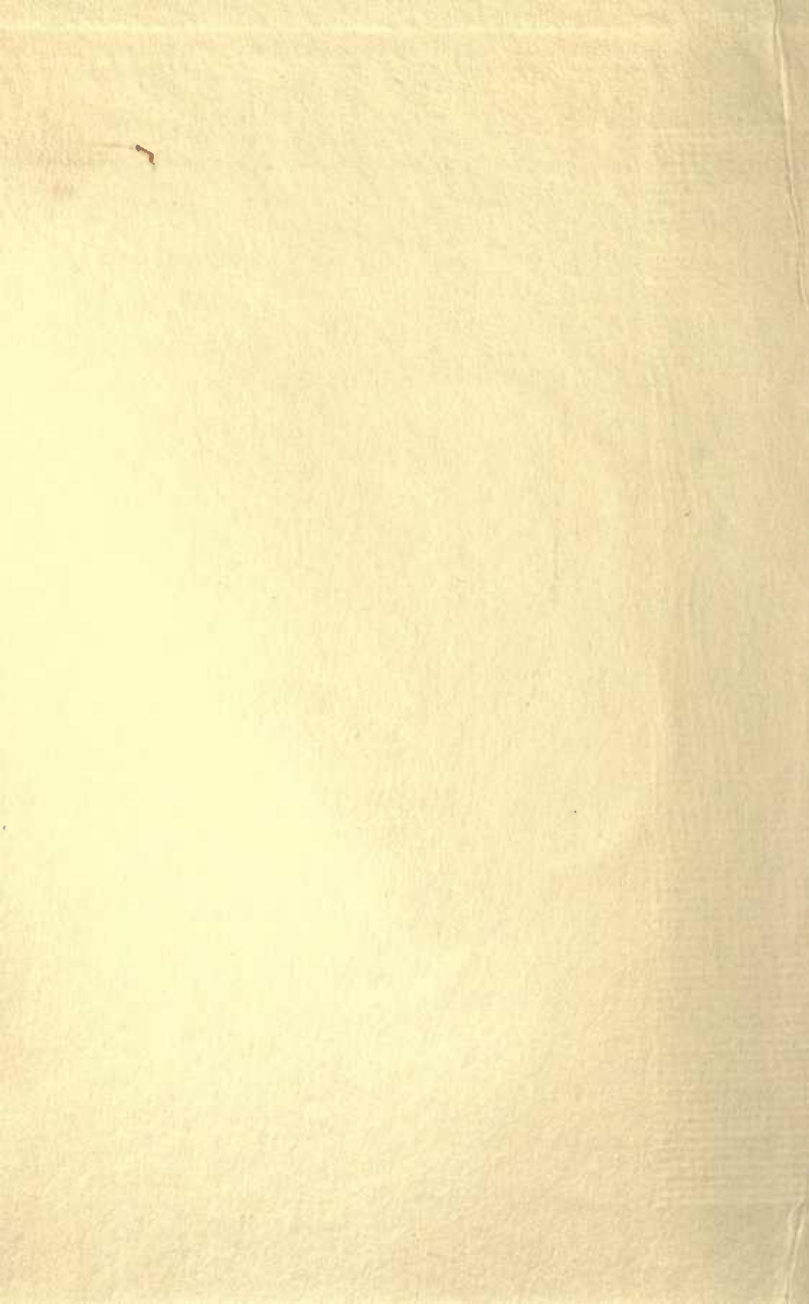


Kingsmead



BETTINA VON HUTTEN





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KINGSMEAD



"I love you," she whispered, "so I obey you"



KINGSMEAD

A NOVEL

BY

BETTINA VON HUTTEN

Author of "PAM," "PAM DECIDES,"

"OUR LADY OF THE BEECHES," etc.





WITH FRONTISPIECE

By WILL FOSTER



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BY BETTINA VON HUTTEN

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LOVING TOMMY AND RESPECTING HIS
YOUTHFUL GOODNESS
I DEDICATE THIS STORY OF HIS FIRST LOVE
TO
MY LITTLE BOY, BUBI

CASTEL SAN GIORGIO, PORTOFINO, ITALY

New Year's Day, 1908

PREFACE

WHEN I wrote "Pam" I had no intention of ever telling "What Became of Pam."

When I wrote "Pam Decides" I knew nothing of that horrid girl Brigit Mead of "The Halo." And when I found Tommy in "The Halo" I had no idea that he meant to grow up and be a book all to himself.

And now that all these things have happened, I can do no more than humbly acknowledge, before the nimble critic can jump at them, the remarkable discrepancies that occur in this little series of stories more or less about the same people, in the matter of dates, comparative ages, etc.

The people have grown up and grown old all too soon, for, not intending to write more about them, I have planted them higgledy-piggledy, in their youth and in their mature age, anywhere, it seems, between 1895 and 1905, — poor Pam advancing in years at a horrible speed.

However, having started the group in or about the year 1895 and they and their new friends having carried me on with them, I can now do no more than hope that this apology for their eccentricities may be sufficient for those who care to see more of them.

PART I CHAPTER I

IN spite of the amazing whirls that modern days and modern ways give to the poor old wheel of chance, it was even now a more or less unusual experience that lay before Lord Kingsmead that November day as he got into the dog-cart that was waiting for him at the little station.

A supremely correct little dog-cart, conventional in every way, similar in its perfect appointments to hundreds of other dog-carts; and yet its very perfection, the immaculate immobility of the blue-chinned groom, the beauty of the muscular grey cob, the smartness of the grey cob's harness — all these things in themselves accentuated the unusual quality of the situation.

“It is like eating white truffle salad for the first time, or seeing one's first Botticelli,” the young man thought, tucking the rug round his legs and turning up his coat-collar, “or like what that chap of Keats' must have thought, what 's-his-name on a peak of Darien. It's a real adventure.”

Without meaning to do so he uttered the last words aloud, and the groom turned, touching his hat.

“Beg pardon, my lord?”

And then another curious thing happened. For Kingsmead answered, addressing him by the name of the last servant who had driven him over that muddy winding road: "Nothing, Thomas — I was thinking."

And Thomas, whose name was William, wondered.

Kingsmead, as the cart bowled briskly along, recalled the last day, much such a day as this one, when he had driven that way, stolid Thomas Berry by his side. It had rained then as it was raining now, in little gusts that seemed blown down from the bare trees that edged the road; it had been chill then as it was chill now; but that other rain had rained on a distressed and sad boy of sixteen, whereas it rained now on a young man of twenty-three, neither distressed nor sad, although there was in the circumstances of his present coming a certain element of the pathetic that he would have been quick to recognise in the case of any other than himself.

Ah! — there to his right the church, looking with its squat tower like a mouldy pudding in an unsuccessful green-brown sauce. Then came the village, an ugly village, dating, the greater part of it, from the painful architectural period of the eighteen-forties and fifties. There was the inn, the Plough and Pig, relic of an earlier period, presenting a pleasant arched doorway with glimpses of a courtyard that stirred vague Pickwickian memories in Kingsmead's mind. Then the sweetstuff-shop, with apparently the same jar of

almond-rock that had tempted him in his childhood. Then came the bridge, and at its farther end the old toll-house, still showing signs of a former red hue.

"Is that a little Spink?" asked the young man suddenly as they passed this last house.

The groom, as he touched his hat, blushed.

"No, my lord," he stammered, glaring at the violently waving child who was the object of the inquiry as if he had never seen it before and thoroughly disapproved of its existence, "it's mine — I mean to say, my lord, I — I — married Louisa Spink, my lord."

And Kingsmead suddenly felt lonely, and old, and a relic of a former generation, for he had known Louisa Spink, and given her a white rabbit and secretly admired her red curls, when she was the age of the child that waved.

After a ten-minutes' trot between bare and lumpy fields, trees again lined the road, and behind the right-hand row a stone wall was just visible in the evening light. Kingsmead looked at this wall and saw that it appeared lower and sadly shabbier than of old, when it had been to him a barrier unscalable by any but a giant.

"Is old Mills still alive, Thomas — what *is* your name, by the way?" he added suddenly, catching himself up.

"William, sir — I mean to say my lord," touching his hat again, while his interlocutor wished it were not necessary for one young man to so often touch his hat

to another. "No, my lord, 'e's dead, old Mills is, thank you, my lord."

"And Mr. Green?"

"Mr. Green 'as left, my lord. A year ago he went. 'E did n't get on well with Mr. Teddy, my lord."

"Humph!"

Kingsmead pulled his coat-collar closer about his ears, for it was raining hard now. "And Mr. Smith?"

"Dead, my lord, thank you. They say it was 'is liver. Will your lordship not 'ave the umbrella?"

But Kingsmead shook his head and sat huddled in his place, unconscious or comfortably disregardful of his discomfort, his hands in his pockets, his quick, light eyes looking eagerly about him.

This quiet, inconspicuous eagerness appeared to be a thing very characteristic of him, and it was.

The cart turned in at the lodge-gate, where a brilliant electric light showed new paint and a general air of spick-and-spanness at which Kingsmead smiled in his collar.

"There's an oak gone over there to the left," he observed presently, at a turning in the avenue, — "a big fellow with huge roots."

The groom's eyes followed his. "Yes, my lord, that went two years ago, and last year a big hellum near the 'ouse was struck by lightning and they 'ad to cut it down."

"A-a-a-h!"

Without turning his head the servant looked at his companion and saw that his irregular, pale, small face was lighted up with a sudden brilliant pallor of excitement.

“The carp-pond! Good old carp-pond! There used to be an old brute of a fish in it that they said was over a hundred years old. Do you happen to know if he’s still alive, William?”

William did happen to know.

“Yes, my lord, one of the stable-boys was a-talking about ’im only the other day. ’E said ’is back was all covered with moss, my lord.”

Kingsmead burst out laughing, his small white teeth flashing under the baby moustache that looked so much more like a finely grown eyebrow. “Don’t you believe it, the stable-boy is a — poet! I’ve known that carp all my life, and there’s no moss. Ah!” His voice dropped suddenly, for they had taken another turn, and there in the dusk, some of its windows already lighted, stood the beautiful old Tudor house.

Tommy Kingsmead had arrived at the home of his fathers.

CHAPTER II

KINGSMEAD is built round three sides of a quadrangle, and opposite the open side, to the left, is the low, inconspicuous door under its ivy-hung archway, more like the door of a small church than the principal entrance to a great house.

This door opened as the cart stopped, at Kingsmead's orders, in the middle of the courtyard, and the young man got out. For a sharp second his heart seemed to stand still as he stood looking about him to the sound of the cob's retreating hoofs.

Years had passed since he had seen it, the old place, and the opening, on a dark, wet evening, of the door, and its beautiful revelation of light and comfort within. Not heeding the old man who stood in the doorway, Tommy stood looking slowly about him.

Some of the upper windows were lighted, and as he watched, those of the great hall burst into gorgeous flower against the darkness.

It was, that part of the silent building, very fairy-like, for the pointed windows in the hall were of ancient painted glass of wonderful colouring, and the slender fluted pillar that halved each of them looked like the stem of a huge magic flower. Against the black sky the

graceful chimneys were barely discernible, but Kingsmead knew them so well that he could almost see them.

And then, just before him the open door; the black panelled walls; the crimson streak of the stair-carpet; the blaze and cheer of the leaping fire.

“Poor dear old place!” Kingsmead spoke aloud, quite unconsciously, his voice made musical by his tender appreciation of the occasion.

It was, he felt, quite without morbidity or even analysis of his own sensations, an episode that was destined to become a memory. He would remember, years hence, this wet home-coming that was yet coming to the gates of a stranger. And he would recall, resee, the open door and the firelight within.

“It — it is raining, my lord.”

The old man at the door poked his head a trifle forward, with the movement of a respectfully anxious turtle. “Would your lordship not like an umbrella?”

It was a rather absurd question, but Kingsmead realised as he smiled at it that his standing serenely there in a pouring rain gazing at a barely visible house must look at least as absurd as the speaker.

“Thank you, no. I will come in.”

Thus he entered the house he had last seen on the occasion of his mother’s funeral, and put his hat down on the table on which as a lad he had been wont to toss his cap a dozen times a day.

The hall, he saw with a little thrill of relief that sur-

prised him, for he had not expected to find it the same, was unchanged. He was glad, too, this time without any surprise, not to be met by powdered footmen.

The butler looked a decent old chap; but then Lansing had certainly been born with the most extraordinary sense of the correct.

"My luggage," he said, giving his clothes a shake and turning down his collar, "is coming on in a cart or something. I suppose Mr. Lansing is in? I mean *young* Mr. Lansing."

The old man, fixing on him two very shrewd and kindly blue eyes, hesitated. "No, my lord, — I mean to say Lord Kingsmead, — 'e's out. That is to say, I *think* 'e is."

Tommy, absent-minded, smoothed back his wet fair hair and wiped his face with his handkerchief.

"Then will you tell Mrs. Lansing, please? You know who I am."

"Yes, my lord — I mean to say — I — I am Mr. Lansing."

If one of the ancient and rusty weapons on the walls had suddenly gone off with a loud report poor Tommy could not have been more startled.

"*Accidents!*" he exclaimed, his face scarlet.

Then, holding out his still damp hand, he laughed — a situation-saving laugh that was priceless at the moment. "Then why on earth," he cried, "if you have a mania for opening your own door, haven't you the

grace to come out of that corner so that a fellow can see you? ”

Old Analyte Lansing shook his hand warmly.

“It was n’t *that*, my lord,” he exclaimed. “I mean that you could n’t see me. My butler is much grander than me. You ’re very kind not to be annoyed. But, you see, — you won’t tell Teddy I did it, will you? But I just wanted to tell you that — I wanted you to understand that —— ” He broke off nervously, fingering his old-fashioned tie with short red fingers that shook, and clearing his throat.

Then, with the air of a man taking his first fence on a strange horse, he hurried on:

“It may be just one of my blunders to say it, but I’ve been thinking about it ever since Teddy told us that you were coming. It ’s this, my lord — I mean to say Lord Kingsmead. Much as I love Kingsmead — and I do love it, even if I ain’t altogether up to appreciating it — much as I love the old place, sir, it — it goes to my heart to be receiving you in it, when it ought to be the other way round. Not,” he added, with a little laugh, “that you ’d ha’ been likely ever to invite *me*.” Tommy’s mouth, which had deep-set, upturned corners, gave one twitch. Then he met the respectfully pitying eyes of his host with a beautiful gravity.

“I really am d-delighted to come, Mr. Lansing,” he returned with his slight stammer. “I know what you

mean, and it is — charming of you to think of it, but I really am delighted to come.”

The old man drew a deep breath of relief. “Well, it’s kind of you to take it like that — it is indeed, my lord. But you see we have made a few changes in the place — not many, but still a few, my daughter Inez being very cultivated — and — I thought it was bound to be a little painful to you at first. So I made up my mind that I’d tell you, on the quiet, that although I do enjoy owning it more than anything in the world, I do ’ave every sympathy with you, and that I’m — well, sir, just damn sorry for you!”

This unexpected finish was vastly better, and Tommy laughed quite frankly, much relieved.

“I can only repeat that I am really *very* glad to come, and *please* don’t be sorry for me. You see, it’s all quite satisfactory; you needed a house and I needed money, so we are both content. And — let’s be friends, Mr. Lansing, shall we?”

He held out his hand again, and the beaming old man shook it warmly. “*De-lighted*, my lord — Lord Kingsmead — delighted and proud. You won’t tell Teddy, though, will you?” he added hastily, cocking his head on one side and looking toward the stairs. “I believe that’s ’im, after all ——”

As he spoke the light on the landing was switched on, and a young man came down the stairs.

Now the Kingsmeads were a handsome race, with the

exception of the present earl. Tommy's father had been very handsome, and his grandfather, and the house was full of portraits of beautiful Meads, men and women, of all periods. Yet no Mead had ever made, coming down the old black stairway, a more splendid picture than did now the son of old Bath-tub Lansing.

He was just Tommy's age, but nearly a head taller; he was blond, and curly-haired and straight-nosed, and a dozen other odious-sounding things, but because he was also broad-shouldered, narrow-flanked, and strong-necked he escaped any taint of femininity or *manniquinisme* and gave as much joy to any unprejudiced, unjealous eye, male or female, as did ever a beautiful athlete in the days of Greece's glory.

"Hello, Tommy!"

"Hello, Lanner!"

The two young men shook hands in a way that bespoke real affection, the splendid Teddy beaming down at his guest, and Tommy, delicate, spare, twinkling of eye and faunlike of mouth, beaming back up at him, with a sweet, crooked smile.

"Glad to see you, old chap," went on Lansing, his left hand still on his friend's shoulder. "I meant to go and meet you, but I—I was out, and to tell the truth, did n't notice how late it was—and then I fell asleep over a book."

"Never mind, I have been having a talk with your

father. I say, Teddy, lend me a pair of shoes, will you? My feet are soaked."

Teddy burst out laughing. "Good old Miss Tabitha! Right-ho, come along to my room."

"Won't you 'ave a whisky and soda?" put in old Lansing anxiously. "You may 'ave taken cold, and there's pneumonia about, I'm told ——"

"No, thanks. I am a hopelessly abstemious young man, as Lanner will tell you. But I *should* like some tea."

The two young men went slowly upstairs, Teddy's arm round Tommy's shoulder, and old Lansing watched them out of sight.

Then, rubbing his hands together in a satisfied manner, he proceeded down the narrow panelled passage to the Great Hall.

CHAPTER III

THE Great Hall was, of course, brilliantly lighted, and close to the enormous fireplace, in which burned a bright fire, stood, as it seemed to Tommy, when he and Teddy came downstairs a few moments later, several tea-tables.

This overabundance of silver and food was due, he instantly and rightly decided, to the cultivation of the daughter of the house.

This young lady, dark-faced and shrewd-eyed, sat behind a large bubbling kettle, and from the breastworks of silver surveyed the newcomer with the greatest self-possession. Miss Lansing wore a dark coat and skirt and a pink shirt, and looked as if she had just come in from a walk.

Now Tommy was very young, and had lived for the last few years in a remote part of Italy, far from English girls and their ways; yet he knew by a kind of instinct, as he made his bow to her, that Inez Lansing's natural choice in the matter of a costume to be worn at tea would be an elaborate and fluffy tea-gown. He seemed to see her, with the trick of semi-involuntary visualisation that was his, draped in a pale pink garment of flowing lines and artistic sleeves. And he knew that her present rough country clothes were not the outcome of

a personal taste, but of a close observation of what some woman she admired wore in the country.

He knew that the girl did not like the country; that she did not like walking; that she did not like heavy shoes; that she admired high-heeled slippers, and liked sitting in warm rooms eating chocolate and reading novels. And he knew, this curiously illuminated Tommy, that the sense of the correct he so admired in Teddy became, in the girl, a decidedly unpleasant and monkey-like gift for imitation. Meantime, Miss Lansing was, he felt, giving him a very clever representation of a young lady pouring tea for a gentleman.

"You must have got jolly wet," she began, shaking the teapot knowingly. "I wanted to send something with a top to it, but Ted says you loathe motors."

"I do. I'm proud to say I have n't been in one of the things for over four years. Do you like 'em?"

She shrugged her shoulders again, he felt, in good imitation of her to him unknown model.

"Oh, no — but they do get one about quickly, don't they? Sugar?"

"Yes, please, lots. No, no, three's enough. Yes, I do hate the brutes — motors, I mean — nasty, smelly things. I have been living for the last three years in a blessed spot where the roads are so bad no motor could get within a mile of me. Could they, Lanner?"

Teddy, who was eating cake with an innocently displayed gourmanderie rather pleasant to see, shook his

head. "Not they! Nor anything else bar humans and donkeys. Lord, that climb on a hot day! How are they all, Tommy — Emilia and Battista, and that jolly little beggar of the washerwoman's?"

Tommy beamed. "All right, the dears. Emilia gave me a blessed medal when I came away. I was to wear it as a charm to keep off the evil eye. The baby has a little sister now — the reddest hair you ever saw. Not so jolly as our baby, though."

Teddy took his tea and more cake. "Remember that ripping thunderstorm one night? And what's-his-name, Emilia's son, the fisherman, down on his knees in the kitchen praying? Rum lot, the Italians," he ended complacently.

Tommy grinned. "Yet when one gets to know them," he returned, "they seem almost like human beings."

But Lansing did not understand, and only nodded, as one who yields an unimportant point.

There was a short pause, and then Tommy turned again to the girl behind the tea-table.

"Do you like living here?" he asked politely.

She hesitated for an almost imperceptible second, and then returned, as she reached for some bread and butter, "Oh yes, I adore the house — as who would n't? — but — the people are a bit stodgy, don't you think?"

Tommy's clear light eyes met hers as she finished, and with a little start, as of one who hastily retraces a mis-

step on a strange path, she added, "You see, Lord Kingsmead, as to the people, I don't know them. It is a very old-fashioned neighbourhood, and — lots of the people have n't called. I suppose because of the Bath-tubs, which is," she laughed lightly, "ungrateful of them, for I am sure there are no such good bath-tubs in the world as the Analyte!"

It was well done, but it was an excellent imitation of what that other young woman whom Tommy did not know would have done had her social path been blocked, so to speak, by a bath-tub.

Tommy handed her his cup. "Do you know my sister?" he asked slowly. The moment had come, he knew, when he must ask it, although his sister had written to him about Inez, so that he felt, as he waited for her answer, a thoroughly dishonourable person.

Inez smiled. "Ah yes. *She* is different. Because she is — well, above noticing bath-tubs! How beautiful she is, Lord Kingsmead!"

It was again almost painfully clever, and Tommy was in a curious way distressed by her cleverness.

"Yes, she is very beautiful. And — very dear. She does n't know I am here. I must go to see her to-morrow."

Inez stared, and this stare was genuine.

"Does n't know you are here?"

"No. You see — she would have wanted me to go to her. And I wanted, first, to come — to Kingsmead.

I am, you will think, a very romantic little beggar, and I may be. But — well, I just wanted to come straight here on landing.”

Teddy laid his hand on his friend's thin knee.

“Of course you did, old chap. It *will* be a jolly surprise for her, won't it?”

Tommy's smile was more than usually crooked as he answered: “Yes. It has been two years since I was here. She was at the Castelletto then, you know, Lan-ner, on her way to Japan.”

“I saw her the other day on my way to — to see a friend. And she's the best-looking woman in these parts, even yet.”

Tommy's eyebrows climbed toward his hair in a comical way. “*Even yet?*”

“Ted is an idiot,” put in Inez. “She is perfectly beautiful, and — she will never lose her looks.”

Lansing laughed, a little annoyed. “Who said she would, Inez? I only meant — little Lady Brinley is only twenty, and Mrs. Albert Strangways well under thirty — ”

Inez laughed. “I don't know Lady Brinley. Oh, Lord Kingsmead, she will amuse you. She was Lottie or Tottie somebody of the Gaiety, and now — she is too deliciously grand for words. *Most* particular as to whom she knows, and Bath-tubs are much more than she can bear!”

Tommy joined in her laugh.

“How painful for her! I did n’t even know poor old Brinley was dead.”

“Yes, he died a year ago, was n’t it, Ted? And now the little dancing-girl reigns at the Hall. It is funny. She amuses Lady Pontefract extremely, by the way.”

But Tommy had forgotten little Lady Brinley and was thinking again of his sister, his Brigit, his plain face a little flushed as he realised that only one night must pass before he should see her. When he spoke again it was in answer to a question, and his stammer was a little more marked than usual, as it always was when he was moved.

“How long is it since you left Oxford?” Inez asked.

“T-three years. I was t-there only one term, Miss Lansing, as Teddy will have told you. The W-wretched Beast, my health, began to growl there, and they packed me off to Italy. I did n’t much mind, though,” he added, so great was his dislike for his interlocutor.

Then, before she could answer, he added gravely, “That is, I *did* mind, only — it could n’t be helped.”

Inez looked at him. “I understand,” she said in a soft voice. But Tommy knew that she did not understand; that there was between him and her a gulf that no cleverness, no adaptability on her part could ever bridge. She might pretend, she might even believe, in her curious eagerness to approach those who were in any way above her, that she understood him, but it was not, and he was glad to think never could be, true.

However, Tommy's was a gentle spirit, and looking at her he smiled in default of the to him fundamentally impossible lie — the smile that had endeared him to more people than he had ever dreamed of.

And as he sat there, smiling, by the fireside that should have been his, old Lansing, who had come in in time to hear his remarks about his health, watched him with a strange feeling of sympathetic comprehension. Lansing was, he believed of himself, ignorant, vulgar, and a ball and chain on the socially ambitious leg of his son. Yet somehow the old man knew that he, and he only of the three people present, understood the poor little poverty-stricken earl sitting there by the fireside that should have been his.

"It was a shame, that was, Lord Kingsmead, that you should 'ave 'ad to leave Oxford." The old man's voice was so much more assured than usual that both his son and his daughter glanced at him in astonishment.

Tommy nodded gently. "Yes. I loved Oxford. But the Wretched Beast clamoured — and t-then, I love Italy. I have there," he went on after a short silence, "a little old castle by the sea — the remains of a fortified place of the middle ages. It is only a tower, — probably once one of several, and a scrap of bastion and a tiny garden in which grow the most peaceable vegetables, under its battlemented wall. There are four rooms, including the kitchen, and the path leading up — it is on a very high hill overhanging the sea — goes

through olive-groves. On the wall of the bastion grow big prickly-pears, and as one looks down one sees the grey lace of the olives, and the blue sea — the very blue sea. That is where I went after my banishment from Oxford — after a year's wandering with my tutor. And there is where I have lived, quite alone since Mr. Erskine left me. It was lonely, I suppose, but I loved it, Mr. Lansing — and there I learned to read. Anyone can learn to read in solitude, whereas at Oxford," he laughed, "only the very big ones have time for books!"

Inez, watching him, resented, somehow, his manner with her father. He was with the old man talking with open visor, as he had not done with her.

Suddenly she leaned across the table. "You used to play the violin, did n't you?" she asked crisply. And Tommy shrank as though she had struck him.

"Give me some more tea, will you, Inez?" exclaimed Teddy with a fierce frown.

The girl stared, and Tommy, in the midst of his sensitive pain, saw that she had spoken in all innocence.

"I used to try, Miss Lansing," he returned distinctly, "but — the Wretched Beast again — think how depressing, to be at the mercy of a W. B.! — the Wretched Beast growled, and tore my fiddle from me. It was hard, but though I loved it, I had, after all, no very great talent. It is," he added less lightly, "a great thing to be able to appreciate good music, and that I think I can do. Do you like music?"

“Yes, very much. I *adore* it. That is,” she added, to her own surprise, as she met his quiet gaze, “I know very little about it.”

“Good! How wise of you to acknowledge the fact! Now — should you think me too greedy if I asked for another cup of tea?”

CHAPTER IV

THE two young men sat late that night over the fire in the smoking-room, for it was over a year since Teddy's last hasty visit to the Castelletto by the sea, and many things were waiting to be said. This accumulation of thoughts that can and must be communicated to different friends is a curious thing. There are those whose brains seem pigeonholed and stored with motley assorted ideas labelled, if only subconsciously, "for Mary," "for Jack," etc. And the contents of those pigeonholes are quite uninterchangeable.

Tommy Kingsmead was one of these people, and his Teddy pigeonhole was full; whereas Teddy, unpigeonholed, could almost as easily have told his collection of impressions and ideas to the first friendly comer.

Almost, but not quite, after all, for the two had been friends during Tommy's one term at Oxford, their rooms had been on the same landing, and often and often they had sat together, as they sat now, talking until morning over a friendly, sleepy fire. These tête-à-têtes at night, in the midst of dark stillness, are things that knit people's hearts and minds rather closely together.

"Tommy," began Teddy after a long pause, during which he had tenderly filled his pipe, "I was awfully sorry about — what Inez said about your playing."

"Dear old chap! Did n't matter a bit. I jumped, rather, and you saw it, but that's only because I am a silly little ass."

"Silly little ass be blowed!" muttered the beautiful Teddy, unsentimentally as to words, but, his friend knew, very sentimentally as to thought. "I — it is a shame about it. I suppose you never play now?"

Tommy looked at him with a whimsical grin from the hearth-rug where he sat clasping his knees, rather groomlike in the faint firelight.

"I never did play, you know. Used to try — used to scrape. *You* used to listen, like a dear."

"I liked it."

"Well — yes, perhaps you did, but then you always did have thundering bad artistic taste. No, I never 'play' now. You see when I went down they forbade me to touch the fiddle for a year. At the end of the year — we were in Florence, and it was spring — I began again. Have I told you? There was a little chap, a hunchback, who came to teach me. And he was rather hopeful about me. So I — well, overwork I did, and break down I did — and that has all happened repeatedly. You see," he added quietly, "I've not the strength for it. It's the hardest work in the world. Besides, I go mad over it — it upsets me so frightfully

because I love it so. I'll tell you, Teddy, what I feel when I hear a real violinist violining."

He paused and gazed into the fire, a quaint look of age on his young face.

"I feel as if the music — not *what* is being played, but the tones of the violin — was a voice — a voice that used to be mine. Understand?"

Teddy nodded dubiously as he puffed at his very evil pipe.

"Well — as if it were my own voice of some other incarnation telling me all *about* that other incarnation. And — in those days it appears," he smiled amusedly, "that I used to be a large, strong, muscular person of genius. That I was beautiful and useful and athletic and brutally healthy — like *you* — only that I could play. My word, how I could play when I was that other youth! And the violin, you see, goes on telling me these vainglorious things until I almost believe it, and then — when it stops — I look down at my little present self in a kind of amazed horror."

"How — how awfully odd!" said Teddy seriously, half shyly.

"Yes. Odd, and enthralling, and very — exhausting. The other Tommy was really rather splendid, and never got tired, whereas this Tommy, poor little worm, is — as you know him."

"And the fiddle?"

Tommy took up the poker and pushed back into the

glowing ashes a charred bit of wood that had forgotten to go on burning.

"Oh, the fiddle," he answered, smiling, "is upstairs in the yellow room. I always have it with me. I love the thing, just its own self, even apart from the fact that Joyselle gave it to me. It's the one, you know, on which he played when he first played in public — before he got his Amati."

"I know, you told me. I say, Tommy, where is he now?"

"In Normandy, with his own people. He is very ill, you know."

"Yes."

Teddy said no more, for he was discreet, but Tommy, after a pause, went on: "He was charmingly good to me when I was a kid. Used to play for me, and I have stopped in his house for weeks at a time. Ah, Teddy, *there* was a man! A great, big, strong, cheery chap with thousands of snow-white teeth, so that he looked when he laughed as if he were lined with ivory. And so gay, and so childlike! And then, when he played, it all went, and he was just Music in person. He was a god when he played, no matter how grotesquely he was dressed, and he always overdressed. That's what genius is, having the power of letting the god in one vanquish the mere man."

"The god?"

"Yes, I mean the divine, the highest, not the holiest.

He certainly was n't *holy*, the Master! In fact," added the sage on the hearth-rug, "I never heard of a great artist who was, bar little old Fra Angelico, and he, poor dear, had to be, as he was a monk."

There was a long, cosey pause, during which Teddy smoked hard.

Then he said slowly, not looking at his friend: "My governor likes you awfully, Tommy."

"Hooray! I like him. What a clever face he has, Teddy."

"Yes. He said that you and he understood each other from the first."

"So we did." Tommy's smile was internal.

"Well, I'm awfully glad, old fellow. You see, he's very shy, my father, with — with people like you —"

"People like me?" asked Tommy quickly, looking up with a little frown.

"Yes — I mean that he is too clever not to know the — the difference —"

"O Lord! You mean 'people like me,' earls and things. Teddy, Teddy, I am ashamed of you!"

"I knew you would be. But it's true. You are such an arrant —"

"I'm not an arrant anything, but I know you are on the point of having a snobbish fit, and *sur ci* I am going to bed."

He rose and stretched lazily, eyeing his friend with a

kind of friendly sternness. "Come along, it's after one, and I want my beauty-sleep."

Teddy knocked the ashes out of his pipe and rose obediently. It was quaint to see the way the splendid youth obeyed his little friend, and quite evidently it was a habit of long standing.

They went upstairs in silence, and at the door of his room Tommy struck Teddy on the shoulder. "Good-night, my child," he said gravely, but with an affectionate gleam in his eye, "don't be an ass."

CHAPTER V

THE silk-and-lace counterpane drawn smoothly over her, Lady Pontefract lay in bed, reading her letters. It was, for her, very early, the stable clock having just struck half-past nine.

On a little white lacquered breakfast-tray, a very dwarf among tables, its tiny feet buried in the lace of the counterpane, stood a delicate flowered cup and saucer and chocolate-pot. On the Turkey carpet near the bed lay a scattered heap of envelopes torn and crumpled, tossed down by the hand of the beautiful woman now engaged, as she drank her chocolate, in reading their contents.

It was a charming room, with gay chintz curtains and chair-covers, and through the big windows pleasant glimpses of misty parkland.

One of these was open, and on the hearth burnt a wood-fire, whose flickering light danced over the room, drawing glimmers of crystal and gold from the lace-covered dressing-table, and flirting with its own reflection in the great mirror opposite the door.

On the mantelpiece stood a delightful group of porcelain figures — Harlequin and Columbine; a gypsy dancer; a black-coated but worldly-looking young

abbé, *pon Manon's des Grioux*, perhaps; a shepherd playing his flute to his fair — priceless, poetic, and suggestive.

And on Lady Pontefract's awakening her maid had brought in several vases of roses, whose delicate scent quickened the warm air.

The bed, a thing of gilded wicker and carved wood, ancient and beautiful, stood out from the wall, and over it hung, distinctly gorgeous and different from the simple prettiness of the flowered chintz, a wonderful old rose-coloured drapery of fringed satin brocade, held at the corners of the thin fluted pillars, gleaming faintly with ancient gilding, by delightful, impossible, pot-bellied little gold cupids, with heels in air and roses in their foolish mouths.

A marvellous bed, but no more marvellous than the lady who lay in it, her black hair plaited and lying like long, quiescent serpents by her sides.

She wore a rose-coloured silk jacket over her nightgown, and in the flattering light of her surroundings looked not a day more than five-and-twenty.

“Celeste!”

“Madame la Comtesse?”

Celeste was old and severe-looking, and wore a long black dress fastened at the throat by a very depressing cameo brooch representing a maiden weeping over an urn under a willow.

“*Où est* his lordship?”

“His lordship *est à la bibliothèque*, my lady.” A polyglot person, Celeste.

Lady Pontefract set down her cup and crushed her napkin on to the little table. “Take the tray, please, and then ask his lordship to come to me.”

She laid down the letter she had been reading and took up another, which, however, she at once deserted for the other one, when, a few minutes later, her husband came in.

“Ponty dear,” she began at once, “do you remember the pretty little woman who lives at a place called Creene, near Isherby?”

Lord Pontefract sat down on a low chair and crossed his legs comfortably. He was a rather fat man, much older than his wife, and had a kind, weak face.

“Creene? No, my dear, I don’t think I do. Are you sure I ever saw her?”

She laughed. “No. I wondered. She is very pretty, so as you don’t remember I dare say you never *did* see her. You would not have forgotten. Well, I met her at — the Lansings. It appears she and her motor once frightened poor old Mrs. Lansing’s pony-cart (the old woman in it), and that she then insisted on taking the old lady home in her car, and was altogether very kind. The enterprising Inez then called, of course, and Mrs. Gilpin and the Lansings have since then seen a good deal of each other. I met Mrs. Gilpin there one day, and she is really quite remarkably pretty, in her way —

Irish, I should say. I called one day, when I had been to Isherby and it was beginning to rain, — besides, I rather wanted to see her again, but she was out, — and she called, and then I asked her to dine — that time the Dunstanburys were here, and she could n't. Only, what a long story! Well, I've just had a letter from her asking *us* to dine. Shall we go?"

Pontefract lit a cigarette without asking for permission, which act, as a sign of the terms on which he and his wife lived, was illuminating.

"Go? Why not, if she's amusin'? Can't hurt us," he added, innocently and unconsciously arrogant. "When is it for?"

"For Tuesday. This is Thursday, is n't it? Yes, Thursday. The note is rather nice — read it."

She handed him the austere-looking little sheet of grey paper and watched him as he read.

"DEAR LADY PONTEFRACT: I wonder if you and Lord Pontefract will come and dine with me on Tuesday at eight? The Lansings are coming — the son, I mean, and Inez — but no one else, for I know no one else here. I hope you can come, for I should like to show you my fuchsia, which is really rather lovely in its way, and it would give me great pleasure to see you again.

"Yours sincerely,

"NANCY GILPIN."

"Nice name, is n't it, 'Nancy Gilpin'?" asked Lady Pontefract, as her husband laid the letter back on the bed. "Well, shall we go?"

“Just as you like, my dear. Particularly if she’s pretty. What does she mean about the fuchsia?”

“Oh, nothing. It is a very big one, and she is very proud of it. She seems fond of gardening. She really is charming in her way. Then I’ll write and accept.”

Pontefract nodded. “Right, my dear.”

This instant agreeing of his to any project proposed to him by his wife was among his friends a joke of long standing. He was a slow-minded, adoring, kind soul, and in return for his adoration the beautiful Brigit Mead had given him, to everyone’s more or less openly expressed surprise, a gentle, unwavering faithfulness, of thought and word apparently as well as of deed.

They had been married for nearly nine years, and both of them seemed, in spite of many prophecies cast for them on the occasion of their marriage, quite as content as their neighbours.

Before the marriage there had been stories, one of which was in its main fact undeniably true.

Brigit Mead had at one time been engaged to the son of a world-renowned violinist, and there were those who said that she had loved not the son but the father. He, buoyant, irrepressible creature of genius, had, some believed, loved her to the very verge of folly, while still others insisted that all the love had been on her side.

These details had never been substantiated one way or the other, but this much was certain: the engagement had been broken at the time of the violinist’s wife’s sud-

den death, and for nearly a year no one saw Lady Brigit.

Then she had suddenly reappeared, and a month or so later was married very quietly, from her mother's house, to Lord Pontefract.

As has been seen, the stories told about her first engagement were various, and absolutely irreconcilable with each other, but the plain, every-day-to-be-observed, and therefore indisputable facts were that whomever she might have loved, or by whomever she might have been loved before her marriage, Brigit Pontefract had been, in her passive, indifferent way, an irreproachable wife, and that Pontefract was a very contented and proud husband. Moreover, none could deny that she had cured him of his one vice, and changed him from a roystering blade who would have been greatly at home in the society of the disreputable first gentlemen of Europe, into a mildly bustling country gentleman, a plucky rider to hounds, and a conscientious if not brilliant justice of the peace.

That the worker of these miracles herself wore a look of chronic, mild, well-bred boredom surprised nobody, for as a girl her face had been much less genial even than it was now. It was at present at least a conventional mask, whereas in the old days it had been a frankly and bitterly rebellious one. So much for the lady in the gilded bed.

Pontefract rose, kissed his wife gently, and returned

to the library. He was gladdish, as he would have expressed it, to be going to meet a pretty woman. He was of those who cannot live in town, and yet who constantly, if without venom, grumble at the dulness of the country.

"I'm driving to Isherby," he said, at the door. "I have to see Jenkins. Will you come with me?"

She smiled at him. "No, dear, thanks. I have a million letters to answer, and Mrs. Probyn is coming to lunch. Shall you be back?"

He did not know. It depended on Jenkins. He liked to feel himself a busy man, driven to death by his steward and his attorney.

So he nodded again and left her, closing the door very quietly.

CHAPTER VI

“THE Housemaid’s Joy,” as the world-known advertisement, written by old Lansing himself, calls the Analyte bath-tub, is a very remarkable thing.

Every housemaid knows what a nuisance, what a wearying, back-ache-y job it is to keep at the point of perfection even the best of ordinary enamel tubs.

Tiles are very attractive, but even they have to be kept rubbed, and then the cement between them changes colour and makes a horrid little dingy pattern amid the glaze. Whereas the Analyte! That is its beauty. Imagine a glorified tile — in any colour you like, though pink is the favourite — made liquid and then poured like thick cream over the curved, unbroken surfaces of a big, convenient tub. Then imagine that this thick, creamy substance, instead of rolling down, stops where it is poured, and sticks like a benevolent barnacle to the whole tub, drying without a ripple, without an edge, and developing, as it dries, the most marvellous, glass-like glaze. Then realise that nothing can crack this extraordinary glaze, nothing break it, and that no degree of heat, no degree of cold — *nothing* affects it in the least; that you can use it every day for fifty years and leave it, when you exchange it for a narrower, drier,

and more sombre tub, as good, as glossy as the day you got it. Imagine these things and you have the Analyte.

The Housemaid's Joy indeed! The pretty young woman in the picture can smile no more contentedly than could your own Emma Jane if you had your tiresome old tubs torn out and Lansing's Analyte bath-tubs put in your house.

Moreover, think of the joy of having your whole bathroom made of Analyte, so that it is like a beautiful tinted shell! The young Countess of Lillaston, so blond, so rosy, so youthful, has her own bathroom done in the coolest shade of green, the tub shaped like a sea-shell, the walls changing from a real sea-green near the floor to the most delicate of pale Nile-greens on the ceiling. Later the colour will not be so becoming, but at present her ladyship greatly enjoys seeing her little person, all pink and white, surrounded by the cool sea-colour.

Then there is pale blue, not bad, and even mauve is pretty. But the shade which the famous Housemaid in the picture is beaming over is pink; and pink was the room, pink the tub, in which, a few minutes after her husband had left her, Lady Pontefract lay, only her beautiful head visible in the creamy water into which the grim-visaged Celeste had put some sweet-smelling powder.

It was very pleasant, lying there, very restful and luxurious; and the beautiful woman smiled as she thought of old Analyte Lansing. She liked the old

man, and his unabashed pride when she told him that her house was tubbed throughout by his invention had pleased her. It was the first time, she reflected, that she had ever seen him unoppressed by society, for even in his own house he felt, she knew, as if the waves of that painful and unfamiliar organisation were battering at his walls. "And the more it *does n't* batter," she smiled to herself, "the more the poor old thing fears it. That Inez is really a terrible person."

And then came, in the midst of her amused thoughts, a knock at the door.

"Celeste?"

Another knock — an excited, nervous knock, that somehow thrilled her as a voice might have done.

"Who is there? Celeste — *qui est là?*"

And then, at last, came the voice, a voice with a quaver in it that was very nearly a break. "Bicky — Bick, *dear old girl!*"

The creamy water quivered for a moment, making tiny waves that curved softly against its rosy shores, and quick tears sprang to Lady Pontefract's eyes. "Tommy!"

"Yes, Bick, it's m-me."

"Oh, Tommy, you — you angel! Oh, you lamb — I can't wait to see you!"

The creamy water was by this time empty and evidently a prey to a violent if momentary storm; and still another moment and Lady Pontefract, in a loose

Turkish-towelling bath-gown tied round her waist by a blue cord, stood looking down — still down, mind you, for Tommy had never grown as he should have done — at her brother, both her arms round his neck, her face wet with unexpected and even yet unconscious tears.

“When *did* you come, Pig, and why did n’t you let me know? Oh, my Tommykin, how lovely you look, and how glad I am to see you!”

Tommy’s small face was white, his mouth quivering.

“Bick darling — oh, my blessed old girl!”

They had not met for two years — a little matter of seven hundred and thirty odd days — and during that time, eighteen months of which had been passed by Lady Pontefract in the Orient, her little brother had grown from boyhood to manhood. Much had happened to them both, they had each met people and learned many things, and yet, meeting again now, there was no break, no hiatus; they were, they both felt with a throb of joy, as close to each other, as understanding of each other, as ever. And this is what the blood tie, and only the blood tie, can do. Friends without it can, and also do, grow apart; friends with it, as these two were, who love each other, meet with a wonderful and inexplicable shrinking into nothing of the yesterdays, that allows, nay, forces them to an instant resumption of the old relationship.

Friends, and brother and sister. Surely the most beautiful and inextinguishable relationship in the world.

So they cried a little, and laughed at each other and at themselves, and then wiped each other's eyes on Tommy's big hanky, and sat down on the sofa to talk.

"And you came yesterday? Straight from the Castelletto?"

"Yes."

"And you were," she paused and took his hand in hers, to show, he knew, that she quite understood, "there? I mean, at Kingsmead?"

He nodded. "Yes. You see, I — I rather wanted to go there. I — I — love it, Bicky."

That was all, but it was quite enough.

A few minutes later she went back to the subject by saying suddenly, as she dangled an absurd little slipper on her toes, "I *like* the old man."

"So do I. The old lady is n't bad, either."

"The girl is horrible, Tommy."

"Pretty poisonous," agreed Tommy the truthful, "but I'm sorry for her."

Brigit nodded. "Yes, one would be, only she — well, I don't like her, that's all. She, of course, means to marry you."

"Oh, my lord!"

"Exactly; she intends to be 'my lady.' But we shall easily nip that little ambition in the bud. Only, you are young, Master T, and you come from the top of a mountain. So look out!"

Tommy laughed. It was so good to be sitting there

with old Bick; so good to see her beautiful face that, whatever it might have been for others, had always been kind for him; so good to be holding in his the hand that never once since they parted had failed to write to him every week; so good to hear her laugh.

“And your health, little brother mine — quite all right?”

“Quite, dear. Sunshine and sea-air and absolute idleness have cured me. But I am a good-for-nothing little wretch. It is a habit, *comme une autre*, looking at the sea and the sky, and wondering which is the bluer! San Luca is the *dearest* place, though you did hate it.”

“Did n’t hate it!”

“Did too!”

She had unplaited one of her plaits and was brushing her beautiful hair with the short, tangling strokes of the maid-accustomed.

“I liked it — if only because you were there,” she answered; “but — poor old Ponty could n’t quite stand spaghetti twice a day and not even the ghost of a morning paper! Oh, Tommy, Japan!”

“And India?”

“Yes, but Japan is better. India is too Anglicised, or too savage. Japan is delightful, because it is so very — ” she paused for a word, and he provided it for her, with a grin — “*Japanese?*”

“Yes, idiot, that’s exactly what I meant. It’s abom-

inably damp there, but — oh, Tommy, do you think you really can stand November in England? ”

He rose. “Of course I can. I really am quite all right. You see, it was all because I was *growing so fast*,” with a derisive glance at his own small proportions. “If I had n’t been such a beanstalky great creature they never would have sent me away.”

Nonsense, most of it, that they talked, but nonsense good to hear. Then suddenly, with the slight stammer that meant shyness, he asked her a question: “Brigit — you are really happy? ”

She hesitated, quite frankly, her dark eyes fixed on his.

“I am very content,” she answered after a pause. “He is very good, and I — I do my best. I am nicer than I used to be.” It was a curious speech, and one that would have amazed anyone who chanced to hear it, but Tommy was not surprised.

He nodded gravely, and went on quietly, “And — *he?* ”

“He has lived — there, you know.”

“*Là-bas?* ” Using the phrase “down there ” as if it were the name of a place.

“Yes. Ever since the second stroke. Théo told me that he is failing rapidly now.”

“You have not seen him again — dear? ”

She went to the fireplace and stood looking down into the glowing ashes, her bath-gown draping her beau-

tiful figure as if it had been the robe of some splendid statue.

"I heard him play in Paris — on our way back from India. He — played well, Tommy."

"I am glad."

"So am I. Then, last June he had the second stroke, and — can never play again. But his mind is clear, Théo says. He asked for you not long ago."

"And you?"

She shook her head quietly; the bitterness of the old sorrow had gone. "No, he has never mentioned me. Théo can't make out whether he has forgotten or ——"

"Or whether he has n't, dear?"

"Yes."

Tommy went to her and leaned his head on her shoulder for a second. "I — am going to see him soon," he said, as quietly as she had spoken. "I loved him too."

"And he you." Then they talked of other things.

CHAPTER VII

MRS. LANSING sat in her great chair near a window in one of the small upstairs rooms, and played patience.

A wonderful invention, this of playing cards by oneself. Thus to be guaranteed a silent, pleasant-tempered adversary, one who never rows one for making mistakes, and whose own blunders one regards with kindly indulgence, is a great thing.

And Hannah Lansing was one of those to whom the comforting pastime has meant most, for she was a very lonely woman, nailed to her chair, as the French expressively put it, by her great weight, and also for less tangible but no less disabling reasons. She could play thirty-four different games, one of which required three packs of cards, and six of which she had herself invented, and long practice enabled her to play with almost incredible rapidity and correctness. She could play while the rest of the family talked, or even quarrelled round her; she could play by a light by which no one could possibly see to read; she could play, in default of a table, with extraordinary skill on her very hard but usually silken lap; on a newspaper; or at a pinch she would produce a pack of cards no bigger than a large man's thumb-nail and play quite happily on an open six-shilling novel.

And while she played she could, if she chose, carry on a conversation with anyone on any subject, and make no mistakes in either her statements or her cards. She was, in spite of her preposterous bulk, a pleasant-looking old woman, with a humorous red face and twinkling blue eyes. There were lines in her face, lines that told, Tommy Kingsmead thought, as he sat that November afternoon watching her, of sorrow and trouble and even sordid worries.

Tommy had watched her for a long time, while her chubby pink hands fluttered over her cards like unwieldy but intelligent butterflies, and then, in the unbroken silence that the old woman maintained, his thoughts drifted away from her and he was alone.

He sat on a stool, on the side of the window not occupied by her, his thin arms clasped round his knees, his chin on his arms. It was a characteristic attitude and a favourite one with him, and he sat quite still, apparently, in the faint light, hardly even breathing.

On the rampart made by his dark blue coat-sleeves his white, narrow face was brought into rare value, its remarkably clear pallor almost a luminous spot in the dusk.

Suddenly he smiled to himself, a sudden smile, humorous and knowing and boyish, all at once. It was the smile, in its quick upward twist, that was the charm of his ugly face; for whereas his light, quick eyes, clever and clear, were a little too shrewd to be quite comfort-

able to the person they watched, the crooked smile softened and redeemed their gaze to one of the kindest, though most intense, interest.

It was quite dusk now, in the old room shadowed by its plum-coloured curtains. In the walls, which, too, were hung with shabby plum-coloured satin, were set narrow, gilt-framed mirrors, blurred and bluish with age and from years of neglect.

Tommy sat quite motionless in the room that had once been his very own. In it had first come to him the idea of being a violinist. He remembered one night when he had sat up in bed reading, eagerly, with burning eyes, all that the Encyclopedia Britannica could tell him about Amati violins.

He could almost see, so well did he recall the scene, his sister coming in one afternoon at the same period and finding him coiled up in one of those uncomfortable but dingily gorgeous chairs, writing an advertisement for a tutor for himself. Absurd little boy! And dear Brigit had not laughed. Very gently she had read the words he had written. She had always been very gentle with him.

"The devil!" exclaimed Mrs. Lansing suddenly, adding, obviously to herself: "Where on earth *is* that ace of diamonds?"

Tommy smiled vaguely, for only his ears heard her; his brain was busy, far back in the young years with that funny little Tommy and his beautiful, kind sister.

The silence continued.

To live with people requires talent; to live alone one must be an artist in living; and Tommy, having for the last year lived literally almost quite alone in his Castello by the sea, silence was to him a thing beautiful and not to be apologised for, and his calm possession of this possibility, so unusual to people of any age, and almost unknown to young men, gave him a certain quaint *cachet* of his own.

Thus they sat, in the dark, the old woman and the youth, together and yet happily and cosily apart.

At last, however, Mrs. Lansing's fat hands dropped quietly to the table, for night had come. All the old mirrors had melted into the surrounding gloom, save one, on whose faint streak of light Tommy's eyes were fixed, as if it were through it, as through a magic window, that they were looking back beyond Time.

He was a little boy again, thin-legged and busy-minded, living in the beautiful old house as its future master, yet at the same time not quite at home with his mother and her guests. Something that might be called the shadow of a frown crossed his brow as he recalled that part of his life, for he had not loved his mother as a child, and now, as a man, he realised that she had been a bad woman, and this hurt him a little.

The shadow fled as quickly as it had come, for — there had always been Brigit. Dear Brigit, most beautiful of girls, best of sisters.

Now, through his magic window, he saw Joyselle again — Joyselle whom he had loved, and who, he knew, was the only man who had ever been loved by Brigit. Even then the little sensitive boy had felt the tragedy in the air; but little boyhood, however sensitive, however knowing, is, Heaven be thanked, still an innocent thing, so that his understanding had been mercifully limited.

Brigit had told him, one starry night on the ramparts of the Castelletto, the whole unlovely truth: that she, engaged to the son, had loved and tempted the father, and that only the timely and happy death of Théo Joyselle's sweet-souled little mother had saved many people from the catastrophe of a prodigious and ruthless selfishness.

"You ought to know, dear," Lady Pontefract had whispered, while the soft sound of the sea, prowling on the rocks below them, filled the warm air, "I was very wicked." And while he was too honest-minded to attempt to contradict this statement, even to himself, her confession had had the effect of making his love for her a little stronger than ever. It was rather wonderful, life.

With an unusual and rather beautiful clearness of vision the young man realised, as his thoughts went on in the silence, that he himself now stood with his face set toward a new phase of existence.

Only the other day in Italy he had been an almost penniless boy alone in his ruined tower, with his books

and his thoughts. To-day found him here in his own country, a modest competence secured to him by the safe investment of the money he had received for the old house, a man with the world before him. Freedom had come to him, and manhood, hand in hand, and he must tighten the straps of his armour, sharpen his sword, and set forth. Adventure would come to him, he thought, with a quickening of the blood, for the world is full of romance, and sorrow, and love.

And because he had read much and dreamed much in his old tower the little young man with the quiet faun-like smile was, for all his shrewdness, very romantic, and carried the thought of love close to his heart, like an amulet.

CHAPTER VIII

“BLESS us and save us!” Mrs. Lansing started as the footman, opening the door, flooded the room with a blaze of light, under which the shabby, shadowy hangings seemed to shrink. “Tea-time! Now, ’oo ’d ’a’ thought it?”

She was an indisputably common old woman, one whose presence behind the counter of a country shop would have excited no comment whatever. She had some h’s, but used them in such a cheerfully and incurably haphazard way that they were of no ornament to her discourse, and she used certain very rough words both from long habit and from a sense of malice, for they greatly annoyed her children, and that amused her, for hers was a bold spirit not to be quelled even by the disapproval of her beloved son.

“’Oo ’d ’a’ thought it was so late? Is your master in, ’Enry? And Miss Inez?”

’Enry arrayed the tea-things and pulled the curtains, but he could give no information regarding the whereabouts of the family.

“Miss Lansing said at lunch that she was going to the vicarage,” observed Tommy, who had risen and was walking up and down because one of his feet was asleep and his arms were badly cramped.

“ And Teddy? ”

It was rather remarkable that neither of this apparently ill-assorted pair made the slightest reference to their almost absolutely silent two hours.

When Tommy sat down, he answered slowly, “ Teddy is out. He did n’t say where he was going.”

The old woman put her cards into their little paper cases, and thrust them into the yellow satin bag in which they lived out of working hours. Tommy, watching her, thought they must be glad to rest.

“ Shall I pour the tea, Mrs. Lansing? ”

“ Yes, please, if you don’t mind. *Out*, is ’e? As to that, it ’s where ’e halways is. There ’s something, Lord Kingsmead,” she went on, solemn but sudden, “ on that boy’s mind.”

Always decisive, sure of her words and quite unfearful of their possible effect, she spoke now with a conviction not to be confronted by polite expression of doubt.

Kingsmead gave her a napkin and a cup of tea before he answered. Then, beginning to cut a very dark and opulent-looking plum-cake, he said slowly, “ Do you think so? ”

“ I *know* so. And what ’s more, — I ’ll take the crusty piece, please, — so do you.”

“ Did you ever hear of the Duchess of Wight? ” Tommy retorted unexpectedly, the bit of cake pierced with the end of his knife — “ I mean the dowager? ”

Mrs. Lansing stared. "Of course I 'ave; why ever do you ask me that?"

"Because you remind me of her sometimes, that's all."

"Of whom does the mater remind you, Lord Kingsmead?" Inez Lansing came in as she spoke, her skirt muddy, her crimson tam-o'-shanter dewy with rain.

Tommy wondered *who* wore a crimson Tammie.

"Of the Dowager Duchess of Wight," he answered promptly, drawing up a chair for her.

The girl stared. "The mater!"

"Now don't you look so surprised, my girl," put in the old woman, dipping a great bit of cake into her tea; "it's vulgar to despise your mother." Her chuckle was frankly malicious. "Besides, the Duchess of Wight, for all 'er being such a swell, is only an old woman after all, is n't she, Tommy?"

She had never before called him Tommy, and the young man recognised in her use of his name a kind of mental reaching out of her hand for his.

"She is an old *dear*," he returned decidedly, "and you often remind me of her. Cake, Miss Lansing?"

"Yes, please. Been playing patience, mother?"

"Yes. It's a game most people play, in some way or other, at some time or other, my dear. And where 'ave you been?"

Inez took off her cap and smoothed her hair carelessly.

"Taking a walk. It's pouring now, but when I went out it was rather decent. I saw your sister in her motor, by the way," she added to Tommy. "She did n't see me."

And Tommy thought this likely.

Old Lansing came in just then, and seating himself in a corner drank his tea with an exaggerated noiselessness, that seemed to Tommy, all of whose feelers were out, to tell a tale of former boisterous five-o'clock rites suppressed by the cultivation of his daughter.

"Where's Teddy?" he asked presently, munching cake.

"Out, 'Enry. 'E's *always* out, as I was saying a moment ago to — Tommy."

The old man started. "Now, 'Annah, you *must n't* call 'im Tommy. You really must n't," he insisted nervously. "I'm sure Teddy would n't like it."

Tommy flushed in an agony of embarrassment, but, as so often happens, succour was at hand from an unexpected quarter.

"Rubbish, father," said Inez, laughing. "Mother is an old woman and he's — Teddy's college chum. Don't be a silly old dear!"

"Quite right, Miss Lansing, that's just what he *was* being! Now then, sir, what have you to say to me?"

Old Lansing's blue eyes met his deprecatingly but delightedly.

"Nothing," he answered, "not a word, if *that's* 'ow

you feel. My wife usually does what she wants to, anyhow. I did n't mind *her*."

"No, it was 'Teddy you were afraid of, 'Enry," returned the old woman, laughing cheerily; "and as to me, I ain't afraid of anybody, not even that boy. But I wish he'd come in to tea like a Christian and not go ranging all over the country in that Merseedy of 'is."

"Jolly little car, just the same, mater." Inez took a piece of cake as she spoke. "More tea, father?"

"No, thank you, my dear. You young people are dining some'eres to-night, are n't you?" he added.

"Yes, at Nancy's."

"That's good, Inez; you'll meet some nice people there. Going to wear a new dress?" he added anxiously.

"Yes. But there won't be anyone. *She* does n't know anybody, either."

Tommy stared at her. For the first time he saw her as herself, for she had for the moment forgotten her model, that embarrassing and encumbering ghost, and spoken out her real thoughts in her real manner.

"Does n't know anybody?" he asked, almost unconsciously.

"Yes. Ah, it's vulgar and mean, I know," she went on, still alone, without her ghost, "but I *am* bored to death, and I *do* want to know people and be amused. We've been here nearly a year, and Ted knows lots of the people, but only a few have called, even of the ones

I met at your sister's. Now, she *is* nice to me, Lord Kingsmead, although she does n't like me either."

Breaking off, as disregarding of her father's and mother's presence as if they had been in China, she stood looking defiantly, angrily, almost tragically at the wretched Tommy, who shrank from pain he could not help as instinctively as he was drawn toward that which he *could* help.

And he could no more have said that Brigit did like her than he could have flown away out of the window, as he would have liked to do.

"She's going to ask — us — all to dinner very soon," he stammered. "She told me so. And I'll tell her to make it a big dinner. A b-big dinner is so very jolly, don't you think? At least, most people think so."

But she shook her head and gave her right shoulder an impatient shrug. "Thanks very much, but it's no use. We had over ten letters of introduction, and have met several people, but — they don't like us. Not even the Greens have asked us to dine. The Analyte offends them, I suppose."

"Oh, come, Miss Lansing!"

She laughed harshly. "What else? Not an aristocratic aversion to — *us*. Old Green made his fortune selling poisonous beer in the East End of London, and Herbert Green did n't even go to the University. I've met him in town. Oh no, it's just the joyous British instinct to kick the man on the rung below one, that's

all. However, it *is* hard to see much difference, socially, between beer and enamel, is n't it? ”

Mrs. Lansing shuffled her cards rapidly, her eyes fixed on her daughter with an expression of pity that struck Tommy as she spoke.

“ It is n't the enamel,” she said decidedly; “ enamel might do if it was for woodwork or chairs; it's the bath-tubs. It's the 'Ousemaid's Joy that does it.”

Old Lansing grunted suddenly — the grunt of some sleepy beast prodded unexpectedly in a tender spot.

“ What's that, 'Annah? ”

“ Nothing, old man. I was just telling Inez that it's the *bath-tubs* that these people can't swallow. It's that picture of the 'Ousemaid's Joy that does it.”

She laid out her cards in ten little piles as she spoke, and began her game.

Lansing rose, and Tommy saw that his commercial pride was touched.

“ It's the 'Ousemaid's Joy that did the trick, any'ow, 'Annah Lansing,” he said angrily, his face flushed, his eyes staring; “ it's the 'Ousemaid's Joy that made the money. The enamels were all very well, but what was I — yes, and what were you ten years ago, before I discovered Analyte? Nothing. Where did you live? Bayswater? Where'd you get your clothes? Not at that woman's who makes 'em now, I can tell you, miss.”

Turning to his daughter for a moment, he hurried on, while Tommy, watching him, knew that this too was a

revelation of character. The old man, usually so timid, so humble, had been hit in his most sensitive place, and he had reverted to the real, combative, noisy nature without which he could never have made his great though not immense fortune.

“You want Oxford for your boy — to Oxford ’e goes. And *you*, miss, you want a year in a Paris school — to Paris you go. You want a big ’ouse — ’ere it is. You want motor-cars — three of ’em at your orders. And ’oo gives you these things? The ’Ousemaid’s Joy. Yes, the ’Ousemaid’s Joy. So remember that, please.”

He left the room, leaving behind him that most eloquent tribute to eloquence, a silence.

He had spoken well; his short, rough phrases had made themselves felt, and Tommy sat down without a word.

After a long pause, during which Mrs. Lansing had not faltered in her game, she shook her head. “You ought to know better, Inez,” she observed. “’E ’s always touchy about ’is tubs, and you ought n’t to rile ’im. Besides, it ’s all true, what ’e said, every word of it. Only —” her voice softened as she swooped down on a knave of clubs and fastened him into the waiting fold — “I am sorry for you, my girl, and — I wish things were different.”

Inez took up her cap and the long pins that had fastened it to her black hair. “I ’m sorry, mater,” she said, in a rather odd voice, and Tommy saw with sur-

prise that she did not remind her mother that it was she who had suggested the infuriating idea to her husband.

Then the girl, still, he felt strangely, alone, without her ghostly model, turned to him.

“Excuse me, Lord Kingsmead, will you? Excuse us all for making a scene before you. It’s — I suppose it’s because we are — Analyte people — only if we are, our enamel ought n’t to crack so easily!”

She left the room without awaiting an answer, and her mother, without looking up, murmured in a pleased voice, “Queen, king, ace ——”

CHAPTER IX

THE Kingsmead motor arrived at Creene just as Pontefract's huge limousine drew up at the door, so the two parties went in together. Brigit, bulky in a long sable coat — Pontefract was a very rich man, but it was not for his money alone, any more than it was for love, that she had married him — put her arms round her brother's neck and kissed him affectionately.

Then she shook hands civilly enough with Inez, and turned to Teddy. "Beautiful boy," she said, giving him her hand, "why do you not come to see me? I am having a splendid white marble pedestal built for you ——"

As she spoke the door opened, and in the sudden out-rush of light his blush was plainly visible.

"Oh, don't, Lady Pontefract," he pleaded, in a voice of genuine distress, "*please* don't. That's just why I don't come, your ragging me. If you knew how I hate that name!"

And Tommy loved him for the blush and the distress. "She sha'n't tease you," he said, as he followed Miss Lansing into the house. "Bick, you are a pig."

The house was small, it seemed, and only a trim maid stood in the little passage.

Tommy, still glowing with admiration of his beautiful friend's modesty, took, as usual, rapid mental notes of his strange surroundings, as he and Teddy stood at the foot of the stairs waiting for the two women, who had been shown into a room to the right of the door.

An oldish house, he decided, wondering why Teddy was biting his lips so nervously, done over by someone with excellent good taste and a first-rate architect.

Above the dark panelling of the walls an old-fashioned but fresh green-and-white striped paper was relieved by half a dozen ancient and very good hunting prints in narrow black frames. The floor, well waxed, was bare, as were the stairs. At the foot of the stairs, to the left, just opposite where Teddy and Tommy stood, a queer circular room had been added to the original building, and its green walls were cheered by the light of a huge wood-fire under a very beautifully carved mantelpiece. In this room Tommy's quick eyes observed a round table on which was spread an orderly array of magazines and papers, several remarkably comfortable-looking green leather chairs, and a curving line of well-filled bookcases under latticed windows, in which grew in boxes some kind of neutral-tinted flowers.

A very charming room, thought the young man, and he wondered what the flowers were. "Mignonette!" he exclaimed suddenly, and to his amazement Teddy turned to him with a quick frown. "Eh? How d' you know that?" young Lansing asked.

Tommy stared. "How do I know what?" he returned, and Lansing, for the second time in five minutes, blushed.

"I beg your pardon, Tommy," he said with his beautiful smile, "I am an ass. But to tell you the truth, old man, I am — all over the place, as you may have noticed."

"Is thy brother a fool? Of course I have. Equally of course I know why — and all about it," returned Tommy with great gravity; "but that is *really* another story."

Teddy laid his hand on his friend's arm. "Tommy, how could you possibly know? I have n't even told *her* yet."

Tommy sighed, with real pity. "Dear old chap," he said gently, "I have seen it before, have n't I? And — besides, I seem to have a kind of trick of knowing things. But — it's no good, Teddy. She'd only be furious if she knew."

Teddy started. "Furious? Why? And besides, how do you know?" As he finished speaking, Lady Pontefract and Inez joined them, and Pontefract, who had been having a heated altercation with his chauffeur, came in at the same time. Tommy made his way up the gleaming stairway, wondering what on earth was the matter with Teddy. He, Tommy, had of course seen long ago that Teddy was in love, and he decided during the short journey from the foot of the stairs to Mrs.

Gilpin's drawing-room that he would speak to Bick about it.

Mrs. Gilpin's drawing-room was a long low room with latticed windows and a little conservatory, evidently a new development, opening from the far end of it.

The walls, creamy white, were adorned with several fine etchings, two good water-colours, an old-looking copy of *La Bella Simonetta*, and a portrait of a beautiful dark-haired girl under a gaily coloured Japanese parasol.

The furniture, scant and thin-legged, wore, it occurred to Tommy, well-fitting tailor clothes of pansy-strewn chintz, and the three tables, each shining with wax, but undraped, bore knickknacks, all good, each one chosen apparently by a person hampered neither by thoughts of economy nor haste. It was much emptier than most English drawing-rooms, and the individual-looking tables and chairs were pleasant to one who liked good lines and grace rather than drapery.

A charming room, evidently expressive of its owner's personality, and possessed of a marvellous quality of extreme cleanness and quiet; even the soft mauve silk curtains hanging in straight folds at the windows seemed to add to its tranquil, shut-in charm.

There were several large bowls of mignonette, and one window was wide open, so that the air, pungent with the scent of pine-cones in the fire, was delicate with its pure fragrance.

By the fire, a small, thin figure in pale grey, stood Mrs. Gilpin. A little silver mirror, such as Italian ladies wore long ago — one has to think of them, somehow, in Venice — hung from her waistband, and as she advanced to meet her guests its small surface seemed to flash a second welcome to them.

This, at least was Tommy's idea as he was introduced to his hostess and then stood watching her talk to his sister. His idea, too, that Mrs. Gilpin was like the demure, sweet flower she so evidently loved.

She even wore, he saw, a little bunch of it where at the edge of the exquisite old lace that edged her corsage a small diamond-and-pearl brooch was fastened.

The Mignonette Lady!

It was a charming name, and she looked a charming person, standing there by the fire.

She was small, shorter than Tommy, but so slight and well built that she would, he knew, look, when alone, tall. Her bare arms were quite beautiful in their round slimness, and her throat carried her head in a delightful way. Her eyes were dark blue, very dark, and remarkable for a deep serenity of expression. Her mouth was too wide, but of a fresh warm pink colour and cut in a way that made one's eyes turn reluctantly even to the smooth whiteness of her cheek, or the smooth darkness of her hair, that, parted in the middle, was brushed back quite simply into a knot on her neck.

The Mignonette Lady!

“ I say, Teddy, why did n’t you tell me? ”

He meant, “ Why did n’t you tell me that we were going to dine with this dearest of dears? ”

But Teddy flushed nervously. “ Because — well, I ’m not at all sure she *will*, yet,” he returned, “ and — I can’t talk about her, Tommy, even to you. But now that you ’ve seen her —— ”

And Tommy opened his eyes very wide. “ Then — it is n’t Brigit? ” he asked.

“ *What* is n’t Brigit? ” Teddy’s eyes were stupid with the blankness of utter miscomprehension as dinner was announced at that moment, but Tommy understood.

So — it was the Mignonette Lady!

CHAPTER X

TOMMY was placed correctly, on his hostess's right, and opposite him, of course, sat his brother-in-law. Pontefract's pleased smile as he sat down conveyed to his wife, as he intended it to convey, the fact that he was glad he had come. She certainly is, he obviously thought, quite pretty enough to give one great pleasure.

Tommy, as delighted in his way as Pontefract, gave a quick, half commiserating, half teasing look at Teddy, who, it was easy to see, was not quite happy.

"Poor old Teddy," thought Tommy, "what a bore for him, my having a title."

Now Tommy was one of those rare beings, a sincere, quite non-political Radical, and if it had been possible for him to give his empty little earldom to Teddy, who would have prized and made use of it, he would have gladly done so. But his indifference to matters of the kind having been born with him, and having grown with his bone and years, he never talked of it, and even his sister did not know what a thorough-paced if passive little socialist he was.

Perhaps he did not know himself. These things happen. But in the meantime Nancy Gilpin was near to him, so pretty, so well bred, so dainty-minded-looking;

and he was pleased, and having learned Teddy's secret, his incorrigible interest in his neighbours and keen yet so far removed from any taint of vulgar curiosity led him to study her.

And the first remark he made to her was, "How very romantic!" She looked at him, her serene eyes full of inquiry. Then, her gaze following his, she smiled, showing small, white, slightly crooked teeth, and a tiny dimple in her right cheek. "Ah yes, the glass. Is n't it?"

It lay on the table between him and her, a large pink rose from the vase in front of her reflected in its narrow oval surface. She took it up and played with it as women play with fans. "You like it?"

He nodded. "It is charming. Tell me the story."

"Its story? How do you know," she asked slowly, her delicate ungemmed fingers twisting the pretty thing thoughtfully, "that it has one?"

"Because everything has a story, even modern things. Whereas your glass, as you call it, is old. May I look?"

She nodded again. She often nodded instead of saying yes, he noticed. Taking it, he looked at it carefully.

It was a slight oval thing, in a narrow silver frame whereon sported a circle of dancing, laughing Cupids. Their wee heads thrown back, their little legs firmly set, the creatures were apparently playing a game in which the object was to pull each other down. An amazing piece of work, Tommy said; each little figure was per-

fect, each face full of expression, some of genuinely childish and one of maliciously freakish mischief.

And on the ground, trampled or about to be trampled by the dimpled feet, lay roses. It was very beautiful, and the relief, once bold, was worn to a delightful vagueness, gaining poetry and romance, as Tommy had suggested, by its loss of distinctness.

"The story?" he insisted gently.

"It was given to me in Venice, years ago."

He flushed. "I did n't mean that. I meant the story that goes with it — the beautiful lady prisoned, or stabbed, giving it to her lover; or the signals it flashed in the sun to the cavalier waiting in the gondola ——"

He smiled, full of a joyous sense of the picturesque. But she shook her head again. "It is not very exciting."

On the back of the pretty toy a word was roughly scratched.

"What is it? Ve——"

"Veronica. Some day I will tell you, but it is a very simple tale."

"Veronica! I will make a story about it, then. No, no, I don't write; I am a good young man, but I will burst into romance this once about Veronica and her mirror."

Mrs. Gilpin looked at him for what seemed a long time, without speaking, and then with a little blush, as if she was by a great effort overcoming her habitual

shyness, said quietly: "Well, there is a story, and if you like I will tell it to you. But — I can't tell it well."

"Yes, do let us have it. It must," Tommy went on, unconsciously accepting her speech as if it had been made for him alone, "be very romantic."

He took the glass in his hand and turned it over. "Veronica. A beautiful name. Was she a Venetian?"

"Yes. The story is this."

Mrs. Gilpin told it very quietly, with no attempt at dramatic effect, her hands clasped on the edge of the table, her eyes fixed on the flowers before her.

"There was once upon a time, years ago, in Venice, a young man, a goldsmith's apprentice. I don't know his name. And every day, at noon, as he went home from his work he used to see high up in a balcony in an old palace a beautiful young girl. She was always sitting there behind a row of flowers in pots, and she was very beautiful — or," she added naively, "he thought she was. And he fell in love with her.

"I forgot to say that it was in the summer.

"So he wrote her a letter, and one day when he saw a basket let down from the balcony, for the tradespeople to put food and so on into it, he wrote her a letter and told her that — that he loved her. But she never answered, and she never looked at him when he stopped his gondola under her window. And he wrote again and again, and got no answer."

Everyone at the table was listening with the deepest

attention to the simple story, and Tommy, glancing from Mrs. Gilpin to Teddy, felt his heart stir in his breast. They were both so splendid, and love was such a marvellous thing.

“At last,” Mrs. Gilpin continued, “he made her this mirror — made it all himself; and learning that her name was Veronica, sent it to her; and the next day — I hope it was Sunday, and sunny — he went to see her father. He asked if he might marry her.”

She paused, and Tommy realised how valuable as an artistic asset absolute simplicity can be made.

“Well?” asked Lady Pontefract, leaning forward.

“No, he could n’t marry her, for she was — blind. He had sent a mirror to a blind girl.”

“He might have married her,” protested Teddy, flushed and eager.

She shook her head quite as if she had been the young Venetian’s mother explaining the matter to a sentimental outsider. “No, no, how could he? She was blind, and who would have taken care of his house?”

Tommy looked into the mirror. “It is a sad story,” he said. “Sad to think that she never saw her beautiful face in the glass he fashioned for her — and she, I suppose, scratched her name here? It is — unevenly and roughly done — as if, poor girl, she had done it with a pair of scissors or a knife.”

“I don’t know. The story goes that she never married, and that he never did, either. And that every day

of every summer he used to pass her house to and from his work, and that she would be there sitting in the sun — in her darkness — playing with the glass, and that it used to flash down at him — poor fellow.”

“I hope,” said Tommy seriously, “that it is all true — even the sadness. I hope they really did love each other always — and wish they could have married.”

“You *are* a sentimental little miss, Tommy,” returned Lord Pontefract with a sudden laugh; “quite time you came back to England to live.”

“Are n’t English people sentimental?”

“Of course they are, up to a certain point, but not, thank God, like your Italians!”

Tommy smiled as those do who know Italians as they really are, but he said nothing.

Everyone was silent for a moment, for the little story had made its impression of white simplicity, and the mirror in Tommy’s hand seemed like an eye-witness of the dead-and-gone love-tale.

At last someone began to talk, and Tommy laid down the glass and went on with his dinner.

“I say, Tommy, tell Mrs. Gilpin the poem you wrote when you were a kid,” Teddy exclaimed suddenly; “she will enjoy it.”

“Get out!”

“No, *do* tell her. It’s a pearl, Mrs. Gilpin. Make him recite it.”

“The one about the toad, Tommy?” asked Brigit.

“No, no — about the snow, I mean.”

Tommy laughed. “All right, you need n’t urge me. I’m rather proud of my early verse. It was full of promise — all strictly unfulfilled! Do you yourself want this one, Mrs. Gilpin?”

“Oh, please.”

So Tommy, laughing, but perfectly ready to be laughed at, recited his verse.

“The snow is very white and clean,
And hardly anything else is seen;
Two houses on the hill abide,
And all the families are inside.

Cosey, is n’t it, ‘all the families being inside’?”

Mrs. Gilpin smiled at him.

“Is that all?” she asked. For a moment he was shocked; but a sense of humour is not an absolute necessity, he reflected, and dear old Teddy had n’t much himself.

“Yes, that is all,” he answered her.

The dinner went on, a little dull but very pleasant, and everyone was contented. The little hostess, quite unconsciously, was a great success. Her shyness was pleasant, and in its unusualness rather picturesque.

Tommy, studying her closely, decided in his own mind that she was probably always a little shy, even when alone; it seemed to be a quality inherent in her, and not at all the result of her environment.

And always on the table beside her lay the glass, a little coil of flexible silver chain round it.

After dinner the three men sat over a remarkably good bottle of port and a little later went to the drawing-room.

It was, Tommy saw on opening the door, empty. "Where are they, I wonder?" he asked, but as he spoke something flashed into his eyes from the conservatory, and he knew.

"'Veronica's glass' showed us the way," he observed, as he found the three ladies sitting down in a bower of delicate green leaves; "it nearly blinded me."

Mrs. Gilpin laughed. "But not quite. Sit down, Lord Pontefract. I have been showing Lady Pontefract my fuchsia. And she likes it, do you not?"

Brigit smiled kindly at her. "I do indeed. It is charming. Such a pretty, old-fashioned flower it is too, is n't it, Tommy?"

Tommy, who stood with his back to them, looking at the wide-spread, flower-strewn plant in question, nodded. "Early Victorian. 'Delicate female' kind of flower. How old is it, Mrs. Gilpin?"

"Only a few years, but I pet it and humour it."

She sat there in her wicker chair, her hands clasped on her little mirror, such a picture of content and peace that they all smiled at her, and then exchanged glances with each other — glances that said, "Is n't she a dear?"

The coffee was good, and the liqueurs, and the air in the little conservatory pleasantly warm, while a suddenly risen wind howled without.

Young Lansing sat with his blue eyes fixed on his hostess's face, and once, looking up, she blushed vividly. Tommy felt that he had tumbled into a most charming romance and rejoiced that silly old Teddy had at last fallen in love with a woman fit for him. As to her considering Teddy fit for *her*, that splendid youth's champion did not pause to consider; and indeed young Lansing's looks were of the compelling order that allow in such contingencies but little doubt. What woman could possibly resist him?

"Won't you please sing?" he asked suddenly after one of the comfortable pauses that Nancy Gilpin's tranquil presence seemed to foster.

Inez leaned forward. "Ah yes, *do*," she added; "sing the Greek song."

Before she was answered Teddy had gone into the drawing-room and returned with an ancient guitar of honey-coloured wood on which hung a festoon of faded blue ribbons.

Mrs. Gilpin took it doubtfully. "It is very old-fashioned," she said, faltering a little; "shall I, Lady Pontefract?"

"*Please*," returned Brigit decisively.

And then, in the slightly stirring shadows of the green leaves under which glowed a shaded electric light, came

the poetic, sentimental murmurs of a skilfully tuned guitar, and the soft throbs of a few preliminary strokes before the singing began. She played in the Spanish way, with the back of the hand, drawing the fingers in rapid succession over the strings, so that the chords came in a sort of continuous arpeggio like the sound of running water, except that that is a cool sound, whereas this was a warm, romantic, throbbing sound.

"The Greek song, please," repeated Teddy, and looking at him she nodded again.

To Tommy the words were vaguely familiar, but the music, a delicious, simple melody, was strange to him. And the words, sung in a not very strong, beautifully trained mezzo-soprano voice, and pronounced with great distinctness, as if to the singer each one was too precious to be lost, were these:

"Oh, how I loved thee, Atthis, long ago,
In that far, perished summer by the sea.
Did we falter when love caught us in a gust of wild desire?
Did the barley bid the wind wait in its course?"

Tommy, his eyes fixed on Teddy's face, heard and felt the song to the deepest roots of him. It was wonderful, it was beautiful, and the whole thing was to the utmost degree satisfactory. Teddy, even splendid old Lanner, could have found no one worthier of him than this lovely, gentle woman singing in the shadows of the leaves. And no song could be more perfect, or more perfectly sung.

When it was over no one spoke for a moment, and then Lady Pontefract rose.

“You have nearly made me cry,” she said, “and I am going home. But — you must come to us soon, must n’t she, Ponty?”

An hour later, as they arrived at the gate of Kingsmead, young Lansing exclaimed roughly to his sister, “Oh, do be quiet, Inez — whistle it again, Tommy.”

And Tommy whistled very softly:

“Does the barley bid the wind wait in its course?”

CHAPTER XI

TOMMY KINGSMEAD had a very peculiar and unusual habit, due, most probably, to his long residence in a country where summer is a flaunting thing of heat and blaze — the habit of rising early.

And this habit, a rather uncomfortable one in England in November, when night rules for many more hours in the twenty-four than she has any legal right, is one that it is very difficult to shake off.

One's brain, once taught to stir at five in the morning, is as unmanageable as a wakeful child and refuses to remain inactive until eight, as leisured British brains undoubtedly should do.

The darkness, the chill, possibly the very subconscious knowledge that everyone else in the house would sleep on for at least another hour and a half, had subdued Tommy's mind to the point of leaving him snugly unconscious until six, at which ungodly little hour he every morning awoke, as if he had been a well-made clock and his first restless stirring its chimes.

Six o'clock on a dark, rainy English November morning — a woful and a chillsome thing.

Just six hours after he had dropped to sleep to dream, such is the absurdity of dreams out of novels (in which

people pass their sleeping hours in living the most opposite and poetic and relateable events), that he was trying to stuff a live owl with chestnuts and sausages, something happened, and — he was awake.

Now a good way to judge people would be, if practicable, to read their first thoughts on awakening — the very first thoughts they have when they are still a quarter asleep and quite alone with themselves. Tommy's thought was enlightening.

“Hooray, tea!” And rubbing his eyes he sat up in bed and switched on the light.

It was cold, and abominably early, and he could not have a fire for another hour and a half, when the earliest servant would come and make one for him (due, this, to his bad trick of having a fire late every night, to go to sleep by).

Yet he awoke with a pleasant grin, and a really cheerful thought in his mind, though only a thought of physical comfort.

“Hooray, tea!”

Leaning on one elbow he lighted his etna, and then lay back on his pillows while the indignant water was coaxed by the fire to wake up and boil.

Not beautiful in bed, Tommy, as was his sister. A small white face under a mat of very untidy fair hair, thin wrists in loose pink sleeves, a red nose, due to a way he had of sleeping with that feature buried in his pillow.

“Raining again. Teddy won't be able to take the

Mignonette Lady motoring. Hard luck. — Oh, damn, can't you boil?" The last phrase, reprehensible in itself, was uttered aloud in a perfectly pleasant voice to the kettle.

Then his thoughts went back to Teddy and his love. There was in Tommy a decided streak of benevolence that was to strangers hard to reconcile with his undeniable and frankly active curiosity. He wanted to know all about people, and when possible he said that he wanted to know, and asked questions in a very primitive way. But the point in which he differed from most other curious people was that he wanted to know about people because he loved them.

It is strange and rather depressing, the reflection that by far the greater amount of interest in others displayed by people is based on a kind of unexpressed enmity toward their kind. "You must have been up to something, or you must have had some underhand motive for doing that," is the thought behind most questions; "and as I'm sure it is something to your discredit, I'll see if I can't get it out of you!"

Not so Tommy. He was destined to become a delightful, whimsical, benevolent old gentleman, and allowing for the difference in age between him and that future Tommy, and the influences that the divers ghosts of him must necessarily have on him, he was now to a great extent what he would be later.

He was now, at twenty-three, a delightful, whimsical,

and benevolent young gentleman, inappropriate as the last adjective may seem applied to a person of three-and-twenty.

And being, as the benevolent and whimsical often are, a born match-maker, he looked forward, now, that raw autumn morning, with exquisite enjoyment to watching and aiding in many little ways Teddy's courting.

He would arrange to see a great deal of Mrs. Gilpin, the dear; and if he went often to her house, no one would talk of Lansing's frequent visits there; for Tommy was not minded to allow gossip or even kindly amusement to brush the bloom off these golden hours of Teddy's.

"It's a real romance," he said aloud, as the kettle's sudden audible hissing drew his forgetful hand to its straw-bound handle. "A real, true, Love's-Young-Dream romance, the two beautiful creatures, and it is a blessing I am here to look after them. They are the lovers in the garden and I will be the gardener, keep the flowers a-bloom, the grass green — yes, and the intrusive stranger off the grass!"

He went on talking to himself as he brewed his tea and then drank it to the accompaniment of several biscuits.

"If that girl saw it she'd be — knowing, and put their backs up — or she'd raise a row. I suppose Mrs. Gilpin is no one in particular, or she'd tease him outright, and that would be perfectly horrible. Oh no,

teasing not liked at all. Good old Teddy, he thinks he is suffering, I suppose, because he is n't sure of her, but — wuff, how hot! — I dare say, if he only knew, it's really the very best time of all. Now this motor ride will be knocked on the head by the rain, which is hard luck. Oh, if they were only in town, they could go and look at — each other at the National Gallery. A very pleasant place for lovers, I should think. I wonder —— ”

He wondered on and on, this little unbeautiful youth, his eyes bright with excitement.

He had observed the Mignonette Lady very closely all the evening before, but her friendly aloofness was such that even his keen eye had failed to penetrate it. If she loved Lanner she hid it very well; if she did not love him she most cleverly hid the pain his love for her must certainly cause her.

For she must know. She was not stupid, and anyone short of a person fit for an idiot asylum must have seen the whole story in Teddy's face as she sang the Greek song. Yet Brigit and the rest had, after all, appeared to notice nothing!

“I'm like that boy who could see bacilli and germs and all sorts of bugs in a glass of water,” Tommy thought with a glow of vanity, “the boy with the magnifying eye, they called him. I really do believe it's safe yet, the secret. What a nuisance that girl was last night, sitting up with us till Teddy could n't keep

awake another moment. He'd have talked to me. I wonder —— ”

Suddenly he looked at his watch, and finding to his surprised satisfaction that it was past seven, he rose, and putting on a peculiarly gorgeous dark blue silk dressing-gown (a present from his sister), he turned off his light and left the room. Teddy surely would be awake by this time, and in case Teddy wanted to talk he would go to him.

For this was not one of the matters in which Tommy felt more than justified in giving vent to his interest by the putting of artless but acute questions. He had in these affairs a very rigid code of etiquette, and Teddy's came under the unnamed but definitely marked class of those in which only spontaneous offerings of questions could be even considered.

Teddy was sound asleep when his visitor arrived, but a cold douche of light waked him with a start.

“ Good gracious, Tommy, what's the matter? ”

Tommy, wrapped in his princely garment, looked at him for a moment in silence. Then he said truthfully, “ I've been awake a long time, old chap. Do you mind my coming in? ”

“ Not I. What time is it? ”

“ Between seven and half-past. That is, it's ten past seven. May I light your fire? ”

Teddy nodded, and getting up, peered out into the cool black dawn from behind the curtains.

“Rain!”

Tommy, who was kneeling on the hearth-rug, gave a sudden nod to the kindling flames, as much as to say, “Hear that voice? How’s that for disappointment?”

“Pouring. Is n’t it a bore?”

“Rotten.”

Teddy, looking in his white silk pajamas like a statue not quite unpacked, yawned despondently.

“Beast of a climate! What on earth can we do to-day?”

Tommy squatted by the fire and visibly basked.

“You’ll not get your motor ride.”

“No. Oh, Tommy ——”

Tommy’s eyes met his, bright with encouragement and sympathy.

But Teddy was English, as much a slave to habit as his betters, and he turned away a little uneasily, almost regretted his hasty confidence of the night before. Tommy still sat by the fire, but he no longer basked.

“Had your tea, old chap?” asked his host briskly. “Just touch that bell, will you? I want mine.”

And thus Tommy, bitterly disappointed, but true to his self-ordained code, knew that the one subject was not to be broached, and hastily asked some questions about the local hunt. What is more, he even listened to Teddy’s discourse, and half an hour later returned to his room as ignorant as he had left it regarding the garden in which he was so eager to work.

CHAPTER XII

"YES, it's going to be fine," remarked Inez Lansing an hour or so later, from the sideboard where she was foraging for herself. "You and Nanny are going to Pinchbroke, are n't you, Ted?"

"Ugh!" grunted Teddy in indifferent consent, taking more marmalade.

His sister came back to the table and sat down opposite Tommy. "Will you give me a lift?" she continued. "I want to see Clara Train, and Arkwright says he can't take me out to-day — something gone wrong with the car."

She spoke, the horrified Tommy saw, even in the shock of his horror, quite innocently; she had no idea that her proposal would be unwelcome, although the chances were that she would in any case have made it.

Teddy hesitated and in another second would have been lost.

Tommy's quick brain understood that whereas he had meant to be a simplifying and cherishing gardener in the garden of his friend's Young Love, the gods had cast him, in their irony, a very different rôle. If Inez went, all the poetry would be gone out of the drive. So Inez must not go.

"Is it v-very necessary, Miss Lansing?" he asked suddenly. "I mean to say, for you to go to-day? Because I — if you don't really mind, I — I think I'll ask Teddy to take me instead. It is rather important for me to go to Pinchbroke to-day."

Inez was surprised, for his request was not only a strange one for anyone to make, but a quite astounding one coming from Kingsmead.

But, luckily for Tommy, the girl's model was an insouciant person whose nature prompted her to take carelessly everything that came her way, and never, on any account, to show amazement. And Inez was, so early in the morning, carefully guarded by her idea of what her model would do.

So she reached for salt and answered with a quick protrusion of her lower lip: "Oh yes, by all means, Lord Kingsmead. I only thought of going *faute de mieux*." Then, for she was curious, she added: "Do you know the Clarks?"

Tommy, without looking at Teddy, answered guiltily, "No."

"The Markhams?"

"No."

"The Carchesters then?"

And Tommy, staring solemnly at her across the broad white table, answered for the third time, and quite without any polite evasions or even qualifications of his statement, "No."

"He's going on business, Inez," put in Teddy, with a grateful glance at his champion. "Why are all women so curious?"

"It was n't curiosity, it was only — well, absent-mindedness," she returned adroitly.

"Like the old woman who added to her inquiries for another old woman's health, 'Not that I care a curse,' " laughed Tommy.

Then he went on with his breakfast, a faint flush in his cheeks.

It was late; old Mr. Lansing had long since had his breakfast and gone, and as the three young people loitered over their grapes the motor came to the door.

"Come along, Tommy, you don't want any more grapes. We want to lunch at Pinchbroke, you know. I'm going to take Mrs. Gilpin to the Jolly Trout, she's never seen it. Will you lunch with us?"

"I'm not sure whether it will be convenient," declared Tommy, rising obediently; "I'll decide later, if I may."

In the hall, as they put on their coats, he turned to Teddy. "Do you realise that I'd rather walk barefoot to Pinchbroke than go in a motor?"

"I do. You are a brick, old chap," Teddy chuckled. "Fancy Inez with us! It is really awfully good of you."

But he said no more, and Tommy, miserable little human sacrifice to the god of Love, closed his eyes when the motor tore round corners amid a terrified scattering

of slow-legged country children, and tried to console himself with the thought of being so useful.

Mrs. Gilpin saw them from the window and came down at once, a slim little cinnamon-brown figure with a cap tied in a very ship-shape manner under her chin by a gold-brown chiffon veil. It looked, this veil, casual and unstudied, as if it had been chosen because it was first to hand; but it was remarkably becoming, and her blue eyes seemed to take from it a quite special warmth and glow.

"It is — so delightful to be going," she said, as she got in and was followed by Teddy, who tucked a fur rug round her in a way that filled with joy the heart of the Sacrifice. "Why did n't Inez come?"

"Kingsmead had to go to Pinchbroke — on business — so we are giving him a lift."

The mendacious speaker laughed as he spoke, and Tommy in his heart vowed vengeance. This, however, he thought, as the motor dashed down the little avenue, was not the time or the place for vengeance; Teddy was to be made happy, and to that end Tommy must efface himself.

So the chauffeur, a true-born Frenchman with a broken nose, the result, he always hastily explained, *not* of a motor accident but of a blow received years ago in a barrack row, was suddenly surprised by a remark in a French that caused him to glance suddenly at his companion.

"*Monsieur n'est pas Français?*" he asked abruptly.

Tommy laughed. No, he was not French, but he had had a French tutor for two years, and — it is a habit like another, he added, that of speaking a language as it is spoken by those to whom it is native. The chauffeur, who was a deep-dyed anarchist and who had spent his leisure time perusing hopeful but inflammatory socialistic literature printed by subscription on the left side of the Seine, nodded with the simplicity abrogated to themselves by his kind.

Chauffeurs are, some think, the missing link between masters and servants.

And so, while the big machine tore through the erstwhile quiet countryside, Teddy Lansing, watching the conversation going on in front of him, felt, as he was meant to feel, as good as alone with his beloved.

Pinchbroke is about twenty miles from Kingsmead, and Tommy had never been there before. Also, he had never wished to go. And he did not know what on earth he would do when he did get there. For naturally he did not mean to lunch at the Jolly Trout.

He intended to get out of the motor on approaching the village, but beyond that he seemed unable to plan. It was a curious feeling that came over him. Useless to plan, useless to even try to think what he would do. He could not even ask Teddy if there was another inn, because he knew that if he did so Mrs. Gilpin would insist on his joining them, and he had set his heart on their lunching alone.

He hoped the Jolly Trout would prove a low-browed, old-fashioned inn with latticed windows and a rubicund landlord; he hoped there would be a small, glowing fire in the dining-room, and spotted china dogs on the mantelpiece; and geraniums in the windows; and an engraving of the young Victoria being told of her queen-ship. If, besides being a mere earthly guardian angel, he could have reconstructed the Jolly Trout!

"There is the church, Tommy," exclaimed Teddy, suddenly leaning forward and laying his hand affectionately on his shoulder. "Rather jolly, is n't it?"

A little red church, with pointed roofs and pointed windows and a square battlemented tower.

Tommy looked at it, his eyes eager. "Oh yes — Norman, by Jove, and untouched. I say," to the chauffeur, "let me out here, will you? I think I'll go and have a look at it," he added to Teddy. "I will join you, if I may, after lunch."

Tommy gave his hand a quick squeeze, and they let him go.

"How very nice he is," commented Mrs. Gilpin, watching the little alert figure springing over the frozen grass toward the churchyard.

"He's — one in ten thousand," returned Teddy, his voice warm with affectionate gratitude. "There's *nothing* I would n't do for Kingsmead."

CHAPTER XIII

THE motor-party reached Kingsmead in time for tea, and went straight to the Great Hall, where Inez sat reading.

The drive home had been bitterly cold, and Tommy was chilled to the bone and went straight to the fire, where he stood holding purplish fingers to the blaze.

"I am so afraid," remarked Mrs. Gilpin gently, "that Lord Kingsmead has taken cold."

It was a tactless observation, one that most women would have hesitated to make about a young man, but her voice and the kind look in her eyes took from it any sting that he would assuredly have felt had Inez been the speaker.

"No, no, I'm all right; indeed I am," he assured her. "I get blue and violet, but it does n't matter, and I — I would n't have missed the drive for anything."

"Then you have got over your horror of motors?" laughed Inez, not quite pleasantly.

"I certainly greatly enjoyed going to Pinchbroke, Miss Lansing."

"A compliment for you, Nanny!"

Teddy, who, his curly hair ruffled, his brown cheeks whipped to a deep crimson by the wind, stood near Mrs.

Gilpin, looking most splendid, Tommy thought, shot a quick, grateful glance at his friend.

Something had happened, Tommy knew — had known from the minute he had joined the other two in the very satisfactory (though unlatticed-windowed) dining-room of the Jolly Trout. There had been at that moment a new light in Teddy's eyes, a new carriage of the head, which, while not yet quite triumphant, yet clearly indicated that triumph lurked near to him.

And Tommy hoped that when Mrs. Gilpin had been driven home Teddy would at last speak. It was unlike Teddy, the taciturnity he had maintained on the one subject since his little enlightening outburst the evening of the dinner-party, for Teddy was a precocious youth and had loved more than once before, and Tommy had always been his confidant.

Yet somehow his very silence, his very hugging to his heart of his precious secret, was not at all displeasing to his friend. It showed that the secret was a sacred thing, enshrined in his holy of holies, and Tommy the romantic respected his attitude, even while his, Tommy's, mental shoes were, so to put it, already unlaced, ready to be taken off for his entry into the holy place.

Nancy Gilpin, sitting erect in her high-backed chair, was, it seemed to the watcher, a little absent-minded, and the beautiful pallor of her curved cheek was perhaps somewhat whiter than usual.

Inez, the jarring note, struck, as is the way with jarring notes, with horrid pertinacity. She had been to the village to do three errands and had met young Herbert Green. He had joined her and they had talked about the coming festive season.

"They are having a big house-party," the girl went on dejectedly. "Lord Ascot's coming, — the big racing man, you know, — and the Meyer-Llewellyns, and Lady Chatterdale, and two guardsmen, one of them in the Grenadiers, and a lot more *really* smart people."

"The Meyer-Llewellyns are *awful*," remarked Teddy concisely. "He was at the house and is a little beast; she is fifteen years older than he."

"That does n't matter. She is the Marquis of Lithgow's daughter." Inez spoke with an unlovely snap, and Tommy came slowly toward the table.

"When is Christmas?" he asked. "This is the twenty-eighth, is n't it? I do love Christmas. When I was a youngster," he went on, obviously trying to tide over the unpleasant moment, "we used to have big parties here."

"Jolly!" added Mrs. Gilpin gently.

Teddy, who was eating jam with a spoon, looked up. "Last year I went to some people near Sevenoaks for New Year's day. We had a good time — sat up all night playing games and so on, telling fortunes, and that kind of thing."

Inez rose with a despairing gesture curiously too poignant for the occasion. "And here are we with this great house and plenty of money, and — it's all no use. Oh, it is too beastly! That Leonora Green and her guardsmen, indeed! She is n't even pretty!"

She was odious in her envy, and her bad taste was blatant, but Tommy was sorry for her. In silence he drank his tea, while gentle Nancy Gilpin proposed a little party for New Year's eve at her house. "We can play games, and have some music," she suggested, half timidly. "Will you come?"

"Oh yes, we'll come — and it's awfully good of you," returned Inez, now nearly crying with shame and helpless anger with fate, "but ——"

Rising, she left the room abruptly, and Teddy shook his great shoulders with a movement of relief.

"Poor old Inez," he said, "it's a pity, is n't it? If the Greens were n't so successful it would n't be so hard for her. What she does n't understand is that everyone likes Nora Green personally. She's plain, but she's — well, a nice little thing — though not a bit clever, which Inez *is*," he added hurriedly.

"Indeed she is," agreed Mrs. Gilpin, looking at him with what Tommy considered an angelic sympathy in her large eyes. "Why don't you get some of your friends down for Christmas — Teddy?"

Something in her voice proclaimed the fact that it was the first time she had, after long solicitation, called

him by his Christian name. Mentally Tommy hugged himself.

"No use," Teddy answered, flushing. "My friends are all men — the ones who — would come. You see," he continued, a little shamefacedly, "mother and father, whom I dearly love, are not used to — to things, and — well, you know what I mean," he ended, floundering helplessly.

Tommy eyed him with severity. "For Heaven's sake, Lansing, don't be a bounder," he burst out. "I — I *do* loathe you when you s-say — underbred things like that!"

But Teddy, though embarrassed, stuck to his guns. "Rot! You know I am devoted to my people, and proud of my governor for having made his own fortune — and all that. But not being an utter idiot I can't shut my eyes to facts as they are. Mrs. Green died years ago, and Green, who is a dishonest scoundrel, and ought to be hanged for murder, considering the poisonous stuff he sells as beer — old Green is clever, and has picked up a very decent accent, and — well, glare as much as you like, Kingsmead, those things *do* count."

Tommy was deeply disgusted, and looked it, rumpling his nose as if he smelled something unpleasant.

"O Lord," he said, half under his breath, "O my Lord!"

Mrs. Gilpin rose. "I must go," she said, "it is late. And please don't quarrel, you two!"

Teddy seemed for a moment about to cast himself at her feet in his self-abasement. "I was a brute to distress you, and — I dare say I am a snob. But — oh, Mrs. Gilpin," he went on, coming close to her, "it really is that I know what I'm talking about. When my governor used to come to Oxford, do you think I did n't know how the fellows laughed at him? Even while they liked him! He is a brick, my governor, and the best father who ever lived, but whatever Kingsmead may say, he and my mother *are* impossible socially, and there's not a bit of use in denying it."

Tommy, confronted with a phase of his friend that he bitterly detested, came a step closer. "Look here, L-Lanner," he asked, his face flushed, his voice eager, "do you — w-want to bet?"

"Bet what?"

"That they are — all that?"

"That you can't get people — really smart people," — Tommy winced, — "to treat them as — equals? My dear Kingsmead, I'd bet you my head! It is n't any pleasure to me, knowing this. If for no other reason, I'd do my best for poor Inez. I'm frightfully sorry for her, poor girl. But — it's no use, I tell you!"

Nancy Gilpin, who was tying over her cap the gold-brown veil, turned toward them.

"Oh, don't speak to each other like that," she said, "you are so fond of each other ——"

Tommy laughed, and put his hand, which was very cold again, on his friend's arm.

"Dear Mrs. Gilpin," he answered, "don't be afraid. I love Teddy. Only he is disgusting when he gets snobbish. If he only knew it, it really *is* ill-bred, and it is downright vulgar. Only," he smiled up at Teddy, his smile just a little tremulous this time, "it's — not really him, you see. It's irritation and — a lot of things like that. Well, Teddy, will you bet?"

"Bet what?" growled Teddy, looking away, but not withdrawing his hand.

"That — that your people can't know and make friends with people every bit as glorious and 'aristocratic,' save the mark, as the Greens?"

Nanny bestowed on him a look so grateful, so understanding, so perfect in every way, that he blushed scarlet with happiness.

"Old ass," he said, laughing, to Teddy, "you really are a sickener sometimes!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE next morning Tommy went for a walk. It was a clear day with a cheerful tinge of blue in the grey sky, and a sprinkle of hoar frost on the road and hedges.

Tommy strode along enjoying the feel of the first English winter he had seen for years, and throwing out his chest rather proudly as he realised that although the weather had ever since his arrival been abominable, he had not had even the vestige of a cold. He was used to being delicate and had never rebelled over his enforced care of himself, but he was young and his energy had not diminished as does the energy of most semi-invalidish people, and this daring to be in England in winter filled him with a rather pathetic pride.

There were so many things he had never forgotten and always meant to do, such as riding, fencing, and swimming, and now the chances of his being at last able to do what other young men do seemed good.

"I'll go up to town after I've stayed with Bicky, and take lessons in things and see if I can't get up a bit of muscle," he reflected, positively enjoying the chill air. "I've got to do *boy* things as well as men things, for I've never done 'em. It *is* a fine thing to be well."

He hurried on, thinking cheerfully about this new life that lay before him; the whole world seemed to await him. Everything in the world is his who longs for knowledge and appreciation and not for possession. And young Tommy knew this great fact by instinct. He had enough money, thanks to the sale of Kingsmead, to live comfortably, to travel, and to learn the world's lesson, and therefore be — in his restored health and his hopeful youth — a rich man.

As he crossed the bridge near the village he met a young man who looked vaguely familiar to him but whom he did not at once place — a sturdy, broad-faced young man with a small moustache and pleasant grey eyes. As they met the young man stopped.

“I say,” he began, “you don’t remember me?”

“I know your face — and wait a moment, I seem to see behind you a fresco of — of Aurora in her chariot — Italy somewhere, of course.”

“Right-ho! Florence — the Hotel des Palmiers. My name is Green.”

Tommy held out his hand and liked the grip it received.

“Of course I remember. We went to Certosa together, and you broke your majolica orange of chartreuse in the cab coming back and ruined my tutor’s top-coat. How funny to find you here!”

Young Green laughed. “Not so funny, considering that I live half a mile away on the Hithermere road.

I'd always supposed you'd turn up, for I knew you were Lady Pontefract's brother."

Tommy stared at him for a moment and then laughed merrily. "So you are an enemy! I mean you are a Capulet. We of Kingsmead are Montagues. Somehow I never connected 'the Greens' here with *my* Florentine Green."

"The name is not uncommon. Rather funny, the feud, is n't it?"

"Well, yes, I suppose it is. Only I hate 'em — feuds, I mean. Such a waste of time. I say, where are you going? I'm walking over to my sister's; come part of the way with me if you've nothing better to do, will you?"

Green assented, and they started briskly through the little village. Tommy was glad to see the pleasant-faced youth, whom he remembered quite distinctly, and apparently the pleasant-faced youth was nothing loath to have words with this ally of the enemy of his house.

"My sister," he began presently, "wanted to call when the Lansings first came, and my father would n't let her. That's what started it."

"But why would n't your father let her call? Mrs. Lansing is a dear old lady."

"Business. Beer versus Bath-tubs. Not rivalry, of course, but — well, Lansing has said very nasty things about my father, and my father has n't spared him, either. I," he added, lighting his pipe, "am rather

sorry. Young Lansing looks a conceited brute rather, but I'm told he's not bad. I've met Miss Lansing in London. Do you like her?"

Tommy's nervous flush flashed over his face.

"I arrived only a few days ago and have not seen much of her. She has been very kind to me, though. She has very pretty hair, too."

"Yes, and shoulders. She dances rather well. However, it's, as you say, the Montagues and Capulets over again — only the Montagues and Capulets of trade. Rather a pity, I always think, but it can't be helped. When we meet we glare. It's a fine sight. Going to be here long?"

Tommy told him of his plan to stay on in the neighbourhood for another month and then go to London.

"I want to take some fencing lessons and so on," he added.

"Ah yes, a good thing. Living in Italy is no good for sport," assented Green with the usual superior air of young Britons in such matters. And Tommy thought it hardly worth while to tell him that the Italians are the best fencers in the world and look down with pleasant tolerance on the English as mere well-meaning bunglers in the art.

Now, as he walked, Tommy began to feel guilty. He had in his heart a plan hatched in the night, and which he was going to submit to his sister, and this plan was a blow, he suddenly realised, at the social supremacy of

the family of his present companion, if not at his companion himself.

Was he being quite honest in holding friendly converse with this Capulet?

Would the Capulet not, later, have reason to reproach him with a kind of treason?

This thought made Tommy very uncomfortable, for, young as he was, he possessed the wisdom of knowing that no one can, in his position, remain neutral. Even if he were not forging weapons to be used in the Montague cause, could he, a guest in the Casa Capulet, quite fairly listen to a Montague's view-points?

"I say, Green," he began suddenly, but young Green had spoken at this same moment, and did not pause.

"The Lansings don't seem to know anyone about here, do they?" he asked.

"They know my sister and Mrs. Gilpin."

"Mrs. Gilpin? Do they? I've seen her. Very pretty. But *she* does n't know anybody either. Now Nora, my sister, is n't a bit pretty, and not nearly so clever as Miss Lansing, yet Nora is asked nearly everywhere. Everyone likes her, and I hear that Miss Lansing is very unpopular."

He was not boastful, he even seemed, to Tommy's sharp ear, to be speaking rather regretfully, but Tommy was obliged to answer.

"I have heard that your sister is charming," he returned with rather old-fashioned politeness. "Miss

Lansing is, as you say, clever. As far as her being unpopular, how can a person who is not known be either popular or unpopular?'

"That's true, by Jove! Well, as I said, I'm sorry about it all, for I've danced with her, and — I should have liked to see her down here. But it can't be helped. Father says old Lansing's English is something fearful, and of course people can't stand that."

"Don't you be so sure," returned Tommy, shaking his head. "You never can tell!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean — they don't know anyone now, bar my sister, you understand — but they may shortly know people. No earthly reason why they should n't. Mr. Lansing's English is bad, but his mind's good and his heart's good, and his ——" He broke off abruptly, for to the son of the man who made bad beer for the East End he could hardly add "and his commercial honour is untouched."

CHAPTER XV

THE Duchess of Wight sat in a small sitting-room downstairs, in her house near Berkeley Square, a large Angora cat in her lap. It was half-past two on a rather fine afternoon, and in the crude yellow light that came in at the two tall windows the old lady looked very frail indeed.

She was not reading, for an open book, on which lay her spectacles, was on a table at hand, and her eyes were fixed on the portrait of a handsome old man that hung opposite her. An open fire brightened the room, which in itself was cheerful and pretty, but the portrait, in a curious way, seemed to dominate it, as if the old man, looking down as he stood with his hands behind his back, had been a tutelary spirit.

And this feeling was the Duchess's own, and accounted for her having of late lived in this small room so much of her time, deserting for it the big drawing-room upstairs.

A pleasant-faced old woman, wrinkled and lined, with bright, tired, worldly, kind eyes. Her opinions were definite, her tongue keen-edged, and many people feared her, which knowledge gave her an unholy joy.

For over an hour she sat by the fire with her cat, for

she had for a wonder lunched alone, and was now awaiting a visit — a visit the anticipation of which caused her a pleasant little flutter, even while it had thrown her thoughts suddenly back into the gone years and caused her bright eyes to soften somewhat under their wrinkled lids.

The wood burning on her hearth was hissing now, in a comfortable and cosey way, and the light being bright, she closed her eyes.

Then — she had slept an hour, and woke to find a little young man standing before her, his hands in his pockets, a sympathetic smile under his baby moustache.

“Bless me, Tommy Kingsmead, how did you get in?” she cried, rising and giving him her hand. “I — was asleep. Now let me look at you. Ah, my dear,” she added, her voice suddenly faintly regretful, “you are not a bit like him!”

“Like whom?” asked Tommy, drawing up a chair and sitting down.

For answer, the old lady pointed to the portrait. “My dear old friend Yeoland.”

“Oh!” said Tommy, who was too young even to have heard of the once well-known friendship.

The Duchess laughed. “I suppose you know that he was your grandmother’s half-brother?”

“Yes, I know that, but ——”

“Well, and I nearly married him, and — we were the best of friends all his life, so I hoped you might look

like him. However, you don't, any more than Pam Lensky does, but it can't be helped. Now tell me all about yourself. Or no," she added, warming with her own words, "let me tell you what I know about you. Shall I? You are delicate-looking still, but you must be sound or you wouldn't be braving this unspeakable climate. You look — nice. Are you?"

"Yes," returned Tommy gravely.

"And good?"

"Yes, I think so. Go on."

But the old lady clapped her hands in delight and then held them out. "Bless your heart," she cried, with the natural gaiety that was destined to survive in her to the end, "that *was* like him! Not the being good — Oswald was never *that* — but your face when you said it. I am so glad you've come, you dear little creature. Now go on and tell me what it is that you want."

Tommy kissed her hand and very simply told his story.

"I have been in Italy ever since I saw you," he began, folding his arms on his breast, "living in my tower. And I am, as you said, quite sound again, though I am not, as you see, a giant of strength. I have — sold Kingsmead."

"I know. I was very angry, but Pam told me about the mortgages, etc., so I suppose you could n't help it."

"No, it had to go, the dear old place. Did Madame Lensky tell you that I sold it to the father of my college chum — old Mr. Lansing, the Housemaid's Joy man?"

"Yes. I'm going to have Analyte tubs put in here; I understand they are quite excellent. Well — go on."

"They, the Lansings, have been living down there for a year or so, and when I decided to come — home — I wanted to go *there*. So I invited myself, and — they were very hospitable and down I went. I was at Oxford — my one poor wee term — with the son, Teddy, of whom I am very fond. He is," he added adroitly, "really quite extraordinarily good-looking. There is also — a daughter."

The Duchess glanced at him sharply.

"My dear Kingsmead, money won't gloss over everything," she ejaculated.

"My dear Duchess, for Heaven's sake don't *you* be a snob!" Tommy was very grave and he watched her anxiously.

"My dear Tommy, I *want* you to marry money, but there are still, Heaven be praised, some few well-born young Englishwomen who are not paupers. Is it necessary for you to marry the bath-tub girl?"

"My dear Duchess," declared Tommy, the emphasis of truth in his voice, "I'd rather *die* than marry Miss Lansing."

"Then?"

He hesitated, for he could not betray Teddy's love-story even to the sympathetic old friend.

"Dear Duchess — I admit that you are older than I," he began, at last.

"That is generous of you!"

"And of course you are wiser. Probably you are thinking me a silly, meddling little ass. But do you think you *could* believe that I really have a beautiful reason for what I'm asking you to do? That it is n't just childish love of managing things?"

"Oh, you funny little boy! Yes, I think I can admit all that. Are you," she added, smiling at him, "really as quaint as you seem?"

"I think so. I mean to say I think I don't seem to be things I am not, and if I look quaint to you, I must be quaint. It is a rather odious word, though."

He spoke regretfully, with a slight flush, but before she could answer, hurried on:

"You know Brigit. Well — she is neither managing nor quaint, is she?"

"No," returned the old lady, stroking her cat.

"Well — she likes the Lansings too, and if you will come for Christmas, so will she."

Now this was Tommy's trump-card for the Duchess, just as she was his trump-card to others, and he laid it down, so to speak, with an air of frank triumph.

"H'm! Does she know the beautiful reason?"

"No. At least, I have n't told her. But she likes old Mr. and Mrs. Lansing, because they are simple, and kind, and — good. Last night I found Mrs. Lansing, who is very intrepid indeed, as a rule, crying quite piteously because some people Inez had known in town,

when she went to stay with a school-friend, had refused to come to visit Inez. She, Inez, was awfully disappointed and — I imagine, not very kind to her mother about it. It — was very sad, Duchess.”

“The girl must be a beast.”

“Yes, rather, poor thing. But then, you see, she’s miserable.”

“What happened to the school-friend who used to take her about?”

Tommy laughed a little ruefully, as if he objected to his own mirth. “Well, she died, and ——”

“And Inez, as you call her, takes her death as a personal slight? I know the type of woman.”

He nodded.

“Well — in two words, I want you to be a Swell, and come down for Christmas.”

“Be a Swell?”

“Yes. Dear old Mrs. Lansing says it, quite seriously, as if it were a title. Will you?”

“But ——”

“*Please*, no ‘buts.’ You know you like Kingsmead, — I mean the place, not me, — and they have a wonderful chef ——”

“Who,” asked the old woman, “has been telling you that I am greedy?”

“Brigit,” he returned, unabashed, “and I *do* hope you are, for he is a marvellous cook. And then — you’ll make them *so* happy.”

He was very persuasive and his great-uncle's eye, as she glanced at the portrait, seemed to be saying to her, "Oh yes, my dear Eliza — you are bound to get some fun out of it."

"But ——"

"And — ah, *do* say yes, *please* say yes. If you don't, my whole scheme will go to smash, for the Greens, 'our' hated rivals, have a countess coming, and we must then wipe their eye."

"The brewers?"

"Yes."

"*Odious* man! He refused point-blank to give Pam a cheque for the Orthopædic Convalescent Home for Children, after she had talked to him most pleasantly at a dinner to which she went on purpose, and then the brute had the cheek to tell her that if *I* asked for it I should get it. I did n't ask, either, and I refused to meet him, so I had to give a cheque myself!"

Tommy suppressed a smile. "Well, here's your chance to avenge yourself. And then, poor Inez ——"

"But," protested the old lady, who had very strong dislikes as well as very strong likes, "I did n't at all want to do that hateful girl a good turn."

"Yes, you do, because then she'll be nice to her poor old mother. Ah, Duchess dear ——"

"I ought to go to Egbert and Beryl for Christmas."

"And you know you'd be bored to death there. I know all about *them*!" returned Tommy the audacious.

“Oh, very well, you little torment, I’ll come. Poe will be furious, but I’ll come.”

“Who’s Poe?”

“My maid. She has *very* aristocratic tastes — however, you are a dear, and I *do* enjoy you, so I’ll come. Whom else will you get?”

“I know a chap in the Scots Greys — fellow named Axendale-Murray, met him in Rome, and I dare say he’ll come — and then we’ll ask anyone you want, and Bicky — Brigit, I mean — says she’ll try to get the Pains.”

“Ah yes,” agreed the old lady alertly, “the Pains are always delightful. Jack is a great friend of mine.”

Tommy kissed her hand and left her sitting by the fire more amused by the prospect of the Christmas party than she would have believed possible.

“A delightful little fellow,” she declared aloud, looking at the portrait.

CHAPTER XVI

TOMMY, being what he was, could not fail to take a deep and living interest in his launching of the Lannings on the social sea. He loved doing things; passivity was irksome to him, except that kind of bodily passivity that means the most violent mental activity; and as he left the house in Berkeley Square he could hardly restrain himself from giving little skips of joy as he looked forward to the immediate future.

“It is rather rum, my going to work like this to get that girl her heart’s desire,” he thought, turning up Charles Street, “but it *will* be so jolly to turn her from — from what she now is, poor thing, to a satisfied and therefore pleasant person. Affliction, even social afflictions, may be good for very fine natures, but I really do believe Inez will be much — much less objectionable when she has wiped the collective Green eye. And then ” — he smiled so charmingly at this point that an alcoholic flower-girl forgot to urge on his attention the bunch of damaged carnations she longed to dispose of — “and then, Teddy and the Mignonette Lady will make friends with a lot of amusing people and be invited to stop — and dear old Lanner will love courting under the auspices of a duchess.”

For adoring as the æsthetic part of him did Teddy, Tommy was by no means blind to the defects in his friend's character, and this snobbishness, not sufficiently violent to be offensive, he firmly believed would pass.

Quite unconsciously, without pose of any kind, he looked on Lansing in an almost fatherly way, viewing the beautiful youth's little weakness with tender regret that only once in a long while waxed impatient.

And now that the Duchess had entered with him into conspiracy, he felt that, all occasion being gone for snobbishness, Teddy would never again be a snob. For surely if the Duchess and the other people whom he had in his mind's eye came to Kingsmead and were friendly with Mr. and Mrs. Lansing, Teddy and even the objectionable Inez must see how worse than silly they were to be ashamed of their parents. At this point, just as he hailed a hansom in Piccadilly, Tommy winced. He, also, knew what it was to be reasonably and hopelessly ashamed of a parent.

His next call was made in Westminster — at a small, dingy brick house in a deserted square near Great Peter Street.

The maid who admitted him left him in the square hall, where burned a cheery fire, and retired to announce him to her mistress. Tommy, taking off his coat, prowled up and down, pausing by the fireplace to look at the portrait above it, — a gypsy-like girl's face smiling down at him, — stopping to examine a carved

Corean chest in one of the window-niches. This attention to detail was deep-rooted in him, and long custom had brought it to a kind of art of observation. After five minutes in the hall in Westminster the young man could have given, had he been asked to do so, a description of it worthy of Sherlock Holmes.

He was standing once more by the fire when a step on the dark, narrow stairs caused him to turn.

"Mother sent me ——" began the girl, when he interrupted her.

"Bless my soul," he cried in an absurdly grandfatherly manner, "you *can't* be Pammy!"

The girl laughed. "Why not, Tommy Kingsmead? Well, I *am* Pammy, thanks. And mother will be down in a minute. Roddy got home yesterday for the holidays, and has celebrated by cutting one of his thumbs off, or nearly, with his jig-saw. How are you?"

Tommy was well; he trusted the thumb in question was not entirely dismembered, and he had forgotten that Pammy must of course be arrived at her present mature age.

"Yes, I am nearly seventeen. When I'm twenty I sha'n't be so fat, but at present there seems to be no help for it," she answered, laughing, and displaying in her own round, overred cheeks two very becoming dimples, "because I am so horribly greedy always. It is *awful* to have a big appetite — so vulgar, don't you think?" she added pensively.

Tommy laughed. "No, it's glorious. But, my word, you *are* a big girl! How tall?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, don't! I'd rather die than tell; but as a matter of fact I am five feet eleven; is n't it terrific? Father says he's going to buy me a commission in the Grenadier Guards." She was, as she said, very tall, and her erect, well-developed figure was much too broad for her height, so that she had, standing by Tommy, something the air of an ocean-liner anchored near a sailing yacht.

Her chestnut hair, silky and bright, was bundled into a net at the back of her head, and her grey-blue eyes, edged with long but blond lashes, looked sleepily out from under heavy white lids. She wore a well-cut blue coat and skirt and a white silk shirt with a rather low collar that looked almost yellow against the dazzling fairness of her neck.

Tommy eyed her interestedly. "You — it is funny seeing you like this," he began abruptly; "you see, I had forgotten all about you."

"Had you?" Her surprise was genuine. "Well, I'm Pammy. And my real name is Wantage, and mother adopted me before she married father. It's all very romantic, only it's a pity I am so fat. Ah, here she is!"

Madame de Lensky came downstairs as lightly as if she had been twenty; she was one of the thin, narrow-footed women whose figures never grow old.

Tommy had last seen her nearly ten years ago, and her grey hair shocked him, although the youth of her expression and the charm of her smile comforted him somewhat. His habit being to feel himself the contemporary of those with whom he was thrown, he had really never before quite realised that this friend of his sister was ten years older than Brigit; but a moment after her coming into the room he had lost the first impression made by her hair, and found himself talking to her as to one of his own age. That Pammy's grown-upness had surprised him he told Pammy's adopted mother, who laughed and smiled up at the great girl standing beside her.

"Yes, is n't she a monster? We call her Germania. Brigit says she is going to be good-looking. We hope so, don't we, Pammy?"

Pammy laughed, showing a vast number of very white teeth. "We do, mother dear. But as long as my appetite continues what it is now, we hope in vain. Shall I go?"

Pam hesitated. "Shall she, Tommy?"

But Tommy had now, in his thoughts, gone back to Pammy's age, and even while he was, in relation to Pam, practically six-and-forty, he wanted his other contemporary to stay.

"No, no, don't go. Let her stay, Madame de Lensky. You see, it's a plot, and the Duchess wants you to help us; will you?"

"Oh dear, yes," assented Pam briskly, "I love a plot. What is it?"

And Tommy explained in fewer and less alluring words than he had used to the Duchess, for Madame de Lensky, he realised, approached the subject already sufficiently prejudiced in its favour by the mere fact of the Duchess's adherence.

Pam listened with the deepest interest, her thin, dark face touched from time to time by a quick smile, and her eyebrows expressing sympathy and understanding in a rather un-English way.

Pammy, on the contrary, large peach-coloured Pammy's face was impassive, almost stolid, as she listened, and her eyebrows were, so to say, quite silent.

Tommy, fresh from Italy, where more than half of every conversation is carried on without words, was more comfortable in his rôle of raconteur with the elder woman.

"And so you see," he wound up after five minutes' hard talking, "the Duchess is coming down to stop, and we want you to come too."

"But I can't, my dear infant! What do you think would become of my husband and my children if I deserted them and went skylarking at Christmas?"

"They," returned Tommy imperturbably, "are to come too. There is plenty of room at Kingsmead. Oh yes, you certainly must come. The Duchess is coming to see you this afternoon. She says you will do

whatever she asks you, because she is a lonely old woman."

"She is a wicked old fraud. However, Pammy, a few days in the country might do Lieschen good."

Pammy frankly grinned.

"Oh, mother dearest, *do* let's go! It all sounds such fun, and we have been in town so long, and father won't mind."

"It is a rather large order, Tommy," mused Madame de Lensky, drawing her brows together thoughtfully. "'We are seven!' For my old nurse has come for Christmas, and I could n't desert her, and then Eliza's nurse would have to come ——"

Tommy rose.

"I," he said, with much grandiloquence, "am a minister plenipotentiary; full power have I to house for this week, in the home of my ancestors, unto seventy times seven! So you must come, and you will like the old Lansings, and you will show the young Lansings that h's and accents are not everything, and that the lack of early education is not necessarily an insurmountable barrier between people and the elect of their kind."

"We are not at all grand people, though," put in Pammy at this point, "are we, mother?"

Pam laughed. "We reflect, to the gaze of some human beings, much glory from the Duchess, dear," she returned.

Then she shook Tommy warmly by both hands, prom-

ised to arrive with the members of her tribe on Christmas eve, and sent her love to Brigit, whom she had, she said, not seen for ages.

Pammy went to the door with Tommy and gave him her large, smooth hand.

“I ’m jolly glad we ’re coming,” she said. “I hope we are to dance?”

Tommy smiled up at her. “Rath-er!” he answered.

CHAPTER XVII

MRS. LANSING, very red in the face, sat before her glass while her maid dressed her hair.

The great moment was over; the Duchess had come, had drunk tea and eaten a vast amount of bread and butter, and, apparently, had not so much as noticed her hostess's slip in twice calling her "your grace."

"The Duchess wears diamond earrings, Horton," commented Mrs. Lansing, "so I don't see why I can't wear mine."

"No, madame."

The words were all that could be desired, but Horton was haughty and her mistress knew it. Horton had lived for several years with a Somersetshire lady whose own sister-in-law was a countess, but even Horton had never before lived in a house where duchesses came to stop, and her superiority among the other servants was, the proud handmaiden knew, shaken by the appearance of her fat Grace of Wight. No longer could she, Horton, *épater* the housekeeper's room with tales of the "Countess of Cumberland, my lady's own sister-in-law and very dearest friend."

And a drop from heights of superiority is always displeasing, as nearly everyone knows.

So Horton maintained an injured silence as she rolled her plebeian mistress's scant hair into a number of little hollow sausages and impaled them savagely on small hairpins.

"I wish to see Mrs. Cockran to-morrow morning, Horton."

"Very good, madame."

Mrs. Lansing eyed her shrewdly in the glass. The situation was not devoid of amusement.

"I don't quite know about the bed in the yellow room," she continued indifferently. "Mr. Teddy wants Sir Wilfred Oxendale-Murray put there, but ——"

The hairpin of the moment missed fire under a convulsive movement of its director's hand, and ran into Mrs. Lansing's scalp. "Good gracious, 'Orton!"

"I beg pardon, madame."

And Horton considered, as she went on with her task, the advisability of leaving her present very comfortable position and, if she could not find one with what she called a *real* lady, to at least find one where she could enjoy the prestige of her come-down in the world.

It had at least been better than nothing to be able to pity Mrs. Cockran the housekeeper, and the other servants, for the commonness of their mistress and her friends, and the countess in Somersetshire had been worth much gold to her as a means of enhancing her own importance.

But now Wilson the butler had already begun to put on airs on the strength of the duchess's presence, and even Henry the first footman had laughed, at tea, at her comparing the countess to his lady's duchess.

"Chummy as hanythink they were," he had observed. "*I did n't know our old girl 'ad that kind of friends. Which just goes to prove that you never can tell, don't it, Miss 'Orton?*"

So Horton's heart was full of bitterness as she arrayed her lady in black velvet, according to strict orders from Inez, who had shown a very unusual interest in her mother's appearance.

As the maid clasped a necklace of fine pearls round Mrs. Lansing's billowy neck, Inez came into the room.

"Oh, mother, how nice you look!"

Mrs. Lansing stared, a half-amused smile on her lips. "Thank you, Inez."

The girl, who was very well dressed in pale yellow, a shade remarkably becoming to her, particularly with the unusual colour that there was to-night in her pale cheeks, came closer.

"She 's a dear — is n't she?"

"Who? — Nanny Gilpin?"

Mrs. Lansing's voice was malicious, but Inez laughed.

"No, the Duchess. And she seemed to like you so much, mother."

Mrs. Lansing shrugged her vast shoulders, an act that caused a kind of tidal-wave of flesh to rise from her pale mauve bosom and roll up in a threatening way.

“Like me, does she, my dear? I dare say. Tommy told ’er to.”

The girl stared, her keen eyes full of amazement.

“Tommy?”

“Yes, Tommy.”

“But you must n’t call him by his Christian name, mother, really you must n’t.”

The old lady took up her gloves and chuckled. “Why not?”

“Because — why, because you don’t know him well enough.”

“Oh, ’e’s only a boy,” returned Mrs. Lansing comfortably, “and it’s cosier calling people by their names.”

She did not look at her daughter, but there was a suspicious twist to her lips as she spoke.

“It may be cosier, mother, but — it’s not done. So please don’t do it again.”

“Anything to please you, my dear. I’ll call ’im Lord K., then.”

“Mother!”

Inez was frankly angry now, and ignoring the presence of the maid in a way that would have done credit to one born in higher spheres, she burst out angrily,

"You are only doing it to annoy me, and it's horrid of you. Do as you like, only remember that the Duchess will think you very vulgar if you call him anything but Lord Kingsmead."

Miss Lansing's indomitable parent laughed heartily as she struggled into an overtight glove.

"Never you mind about the Duchess, my dear. The Duchess won't care a pin what I call anybody. She and me 'll get along all right, because she's clever enough to dislike affectation, and because I'm clever enough to seem just what the Lord made me. The thing she won't like is your being grand. Don't you be grand, Inez Maria, or she won't like you. If you aren't born grand it's vulgar to try, mind that, and it does n't fool anyone, not even servants — does it, 'Orton?"

Horton, who was a consistently malicious person, and who thoroughly enjoyed rows, pursed her lips primly.

"I'm sure I don't know, madame. I've eard Lady Cumberland say ——"

Mrs. Lansing waved her half-gloved hand indulgently. "Yes, I remember your telling me that. Well, Inez, come along, let's go down. And you take my advice, and be natural. Then if the Duchess don't like you she just *won't like you*; she can't laugh at you, or think you vulgar. Whereas if you wince when I drop an 'h' or look bored when your father

and I talk, then she 'll despise you. Give me your arm, my dear."

Inez was silenced. All her life she had failed to understand her mother, and the old woman, for the sake of peace, seldom spoke out what the girl had an uneasy sense was in her mind. But when, as on this occasion, Mrs. Lansing did speak out and assert her authority, her mental weight hopelessly outbalanced her daughter's, and Inez, baffled and angry though she was, came nearer than at any other time to admiring her.

"I did n't mean to be rude, mother," Inez said as they went very slowly downstairs.

"You were n't rude, but you don't always understand things, and I am your mother and must tell you. I'm glad for your sake that the Duchess has come, and Tommy was a dear to arrange it. And as to me — well, she is a clever woman and I like her, and we get on together very nicely."

Inez did not answer. She herself, modelling her manner closely after the young woman whose existence Tommy had so quickly discovered, had met the Duchess calmly and gracefully, but she knew that the ducal advent had been in reality very upsetting to her, whereas her mother's tranquillity was, she fully realised, perfectly unaffected and deep-rooted.

The difference between her mother and herself was that she strove for what her mother, in spite of her educational defects, possessed as a natural gift. And

as they went down the hall the girl hated herself for her eternal attitude of pose. Why could not she be natural — be well bred naturally?

It was a difficult question, and her mind was not capable of answering it. When they entered the drawing-room they found Tommy alone in it, sitting close to the fire. Rising, he came toward them.

"Well," he cried eagerly, "how do you like her?"

Mrs. Lansing with a grunt of relief lowered her huge body into a chair and leaned her stick against a table.

"I like 'er very much," she returned simply, while the half-reluctant admiration for her again surged in her daughter's mind.

"Yes, is n't she nice? She really is a dear. Has Habberton come, Mrs. Lansing?"

"Yes, he came an hour ago."

"He amuses the Duchess," explained the Master of Ceremonies quite seriously. "He writes, you know, and she likes having him about."

"This is all very kind of you, Lord Kingsmead," began Inez suddenly, her dark face flushing; "nobody has thanked you ——"

"My dear Miss Lansing, please *don't*. I love it — not being thanked, but having the party. You must remember that I have been living the life of a hermit for years, and that I love people. Also, I am by nature the most *meddlesome* little beggar!"

"That you 're not, Tommy," declared the old woman decisively. "If you don't want to be thanked you sha' n't be, but I won't let you call yourself names. I think this party delightful, and so does 'Enry, and — the nicest part of it is 'aving you with us. I think you are about the nicest boy I ever knew. So there!"

Tommy's little sensitive face flushed scarlet, but it was with pleasure, not with embarrassment. He was never embarrassed unless he found himself forced to save a situation by an implied or an expressed lie. This child-like confidence, not so much in himself as in others, was one of his strongest characteristics.

"Thank you very much," he said, bending over her fat old hand and kissing it gently, "I — I do so like to be liked."

"Well, well, well! Making love to my wife, are you, Lord Kingsmead?" Old Lansing stood beside them, his quick blue eyes twinkling pleasantly.

Tommy laughed. "She has been making love to me," he answered; "have n't you, Mrs. Lansing?"

"That I 'ave, 'Enry. Shocked?"

Her smile up at her little old husband was very sweet, and Tommy suddenly saw her, in one of his lightning-flashes of visualisation, as she must have been in their wooing time. And because he knew that she had been a poor girl, a factory girl, he seemed to see her, brown-haired and bright-eyed, standing by a large wheel in a dark wheel-filled room. The wheels, he fancied, were

looms, but no loom was ever in the least like the one of his imagination.

For a moment, thus, he stood looking on at the youth of his old host and hostess, and his romantic heart beat loud in his breast.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE Duchess, whose interest in Tommy's plan was perfectly unaffected as well as keen, enjoyed her excellent dinner with a zest which very few old women attain to; for over half a century of exaggeratedly luxurious feeding does not tend to strengthen the digestive apparatus of most people.

"I, however," the old lady declared with the gay air that made her matchless among her contemporaries, "am an ostrich! And the ostrich is an excellent and contented bird, is n't he, Tommy?"

Tommy nodded, his most faunlike smile curling his mouth. "The king of the feathered kingdom," he returned, "or the queen. I too am a devotee of the table. My favourite dish is maccaroni and sago — maccaroni cooked in gravy, full of crumbs of some perfectly indistinguishable meat."

Lady Pontefract smiled down the table at him. "And wee song-birds fried in batter!"

He flushed. "I've never had 'em again, Brigit — really *never*." The episode of the song-birds, served to them at dinner one night at the Castelletto, had been a painful one, for Tommy had torn his hair in despair over the untimely and horrid fate of the tiny things,

while his cook and factotum, her hands on her hips, regarded him in kindly, scornful wonder. Brigit had never forgotten the scene.

There were various such pictures in the back of her mind, waiting only for the flash-light of memory to bring them into vivid prominence.

Another was Tommy lying in bed tossed with fever, racked with pain, listening to Victor Joyselle playing the violin. He had been full of gentle kindness to her little brother, the great man whom she had loved — whom, in part, she should always love. And that autumn evening, as he played to the sick child, his face had been full of a kind of glory.

Lady Pontefract ate her dinner as her neighbours did, answered old Lansing, who, liking her, was not frightened by her grandeur, but talked to her quite naturally and amusingly, and to the other people at the table looked perfectly self-possessed and as usual. But in reality her mind had gone back ten years or more and she was re-living the one year of her life that had been real life.

How they had abused him! How her mother had reviled her! How, after the death of his wife, she, Brigit, had suffered!

But they had let her try to help him. Théo had been good to her, and only the Master's own gentle indifference to her presence had at last broken her down and sent her away from him.

"I was very wicked," she told herself tranquilly, facing, as she had always done, her own iniquity, "and he did try to be loyal to his son. It was I who would n't let him. But he did love me a little, and if I had been good he would have loved me much — as a daughter."

Ancient history, all this, but it was in the mind of more than Lady Pontefract that evening. For the Duchess had last dined at Kingsmead during the first visit of the violinist, and now she too, as she listened to the epigrammatic and slightly forced wit of the pale-lipped novelist beside her, recalled the night she had watched the beautiful girl and wondered how the love of a pleasant but negative youth like Théo Joyselle could so transform her.

"What does one hear of Joyselle, Brigit?" she asked suddenly.

Lady Pontefract looked at her. "I was just thinking about him, Duchess. He has had another stroke and is living in Normandy. Théo tells me that his mind is quite clear and that he seems very contented, although he can never play again."

She spoke without a shade of embarrassment, her sombre, dark eyes fixed on the old woman's face.

"Poor man, poor man! I heard him play in town two years ago. He was magnificent that day — nearly drove his audience mad. A most majestic creature he was."

"Yes. I last heard him in Paris — at the Châtelet, just after we came home from the East."

The Duchess's eyes glowed. "Did you see him to speak to?" She was very curious and had not the gentle tact that kept Tommy's curiosity so well within bounds.

Brigit smiled. "No. It would have upset me, and he would not have liked it," she returned; "but Ponty saw him at the Café de Paris one night. He was greatly *en train*, throwing flowers, etc."

"A delightful *vaurien*," murmured the Duchess, a little disappointed, for though she liked Brigit it would have amused her to detect in her some sign of emotion. Tommy it was who answered her.

"*Vaurien*, Duchess? He? How can you!"

"My dear Tommy, don't teach your grandmother — etc. A great musician, a genius, a charming and a good friend — all these things I will grant you; but — oh yes, quite decidedly a *vaurien* as well. Loved not wisely but too often — that kind of person. Ah me!" she heaved a deep sigh as she removed a drop of mayonnaise that had fallen on her bejewelled old bosom, "how true it is, in matters of love, that to him who has much will be given. The creature loved dozens of women, and hundreds of women loved him."

Old Lansing, who vaguely remembered a story about the great fiddler and Lady Pontefract, coughed diffidently at this point and drew a herring across the trail,

in the shape of a sudden question about the Duchess's dog, whom he had seen being carried upstairs by her maid.

"Oh, Flafla? Nasty little dog. I hate little dogs, but my maid likes 'em, and as Flafla is very valuable (somebody gave her to me), Poe is very attentive to her. She enhances Poe's importance, I dare say. Do you like dogs, Mr. Lansing?"

Old Lansing's wistful, wrinkled face suddenly broadened delightedly.

"Yes, your grace, I *love* 'em. I've got a terrier, Pincher, 'oo is as intelligent as most 'uman beings. 'E sits up and begs just ——"

"Just like a man? Yes, yes, dogs, in their unattractive qualities, are very like men. They are greedy, low-minded, time-serving — and capricious. I never saw a dog who wanted ever to be where he was. If they 're in they want to go out, and if they 're out they want to go in. *Hate 'em!*"

Everyone laughed, for her arraignment she delivered in a pleasant, soft voice, while she beamed at old Lansing, who was much surprised by the result of his question.

The Duchess, old as she was, usually found herself the centre of attraction at dinner. She was shrewd and kindly, and wise with the great wisdom of those old people who have lived every moment of their lives.

So she smiled at her audience, as the others had tac-

itly constituted themselves, and with a gay wave of a well-kept, curiously veined old hand, dismissed it as an entity and made it recede into individuality.

"Who," she said in an undertone to old Lansing as two or three different conversations began at the same time, "did you say this charming little creature in white is?"

"Gilpin," whispered Lansing behind his hand. "A widow. 'Usband in the army. Great friend of my girl's."

"I like her — nice hair — nice eyes. Have you ever met Pam Wantage, Mr. Lansing — I mean Pam Lensky? They are coming to-morrow."

Lansing glanced at her quickly, some of the shrewdness and self-possession of his business personality flowing for a moment through the shy dulness of his society manner.

"No," he returned frankly, "never even 'eard of 'er. This party, Duchess, is really Tommy's, as you must see."

"I gathered as much. As a matter of fact, indeed, he told me so. Oh, I quite understand," she went on, "and I like it, too. It's hard for a young thing like your girl to see gaiety going on and not be in it. As to Tommy — he is my greatest joy. He ought to be handsome and he is n't, but — his funny face is charming, I think. Is he in love with your daughter?"

Lansing started and then laughed. "Not likely, is

it? Of course 'e is n't. But — I think 'e likes my wife and me. Teddy 'e loves. Why 'e should take such a lot of trouble about us I can't quite see, but — there it is. It amuses 'im, I suppose. 'E 's romantic, Tommy is."

The Duchess was very glad she had come. Her great-nephew the present duke was a model landlord and a budding pillar of state, — if a pillar can be said ever to do anything so poetic as bud, — but he was a dull dog, and she would have loathed Christmas with him and his prolific and red-nosed wife. It was a great grievance of the old lady's, this fact that just *her* great-nephew should be so indisputably the dullest duke in England, for she herself was as unquestionably the gayest dowager-duchess, as well as the second oldest. It bored her beyond words to hear people praise the young man who kept his strawberry leaves so stodgily under a bushel, and she used sorrowfully to enumerate the bold, bad young dukes who *should* have been her nephews.

"Charlotte St. Edmunds mourns over that Gaiety daughter-in-law of hers," she had been heard to cry, "whereas I would welcome her with open arms. A delightful, amusing little thing, who makes St. Edmunds stand round and wait on her as if he were a slave and she a queen. *Most* amusing! And as to his debts and his breach-of-promise case — bless us and save us, I would pay someone to sue Egbert if there was any chance of getting even some fun out of it. But there are n't

twelve men in England who would n't bring in a verdict for him against any possible evidence. A most horrible young man, my ducal nephew!"

But then Eliza Wight was a shocking old woman, and those of her contemporaries to whom, as to Solomon and David, time had brought a certain amount of plated piety, used to shake their heads over her outspokenness and comfortably forget in their dove-coloured presents their own more or less purple pasts.

Therefore, her old spirit of adventure still, as she herself would have put it, "going strong," the Duchess smiled at pretty Nancy Gilpin and handsome Teddy, and was glad that she was here and not with Egbert and Beryl at Wight Castle.

CHAPTER XIX

"It is," Tommy told himself several hours later, as he walked up and down his room, his hands in his trousers pockets, "the end of the first part. Or rather, possibly, the introduction. My coming, my grasping the situation — or no, I did n't grasp it, it just seemed to soak in, as if I were a 'sponge-finger' and it the rum and sugar — was the introduction — the prologue. Teddy, the dear, and his dear old father and mother, and Inez. She stands for unrest, Inez, and mental discomfort. Quite obviously the one to be pacified, the one requiring sops. And then the Mignonette Lady! She, in her way, is perfect. And it is a good way. She is not brilliant, but brilliant women are a bore in the long run. She is beautiful, and quiet, and sympathetic, and good.

"And Teddy adores her. He will always adore her. It is the Blessed, Marvellous, Real Thing.

"In this *galère* arrive I, Tommy the Small and Interested. And I wonder at first, and then, of course, I squirm. (If that girl could only realise, poor thing, that it's the squirming feeling one gets when with her father and mother *and her* that matters!) I like the old ones, and am sorry for the young one.

“And then, as if a worsted warrior suddenly remembered that deep in one of his pockets — do warriors have pockets? — he carries a forgotten weapon, I remember my forgotten weapon.

“Teddy’s love-story must be told in a beautiful garden, not in a — not in a crowded room full of scolding people. Inez must be placated, poor girl! Father and mother must be shown at their real value, so that she will not enhance the squirmy feeling. Tommy the Insignificant must go forth nonce, and the Right Honourable Earl of Kingsmead burst forth from that modest chrysalis. Hey presto! — a Duchess, a Scots Greysman, the much-sought-after Madame de Lensky.

“Christmas, full of sentimental possibilities, the Mignonette Lady in the house with Teddy, a dance New Year’s eve in the Great Hall of my fathers, — ‘Peace on earth, good will to all men,’ ” concluded the soliloquiser, suddenly serious, quoting the beautiful phrase as the old version hath it, for he had lived of late in a country where the ancient form prevails.

His window was open, for the cold weather had broken, and a warm, light rain had just stopped falling. Standing there looking out into the mild night, Tommy’s face wore a quaint expression of pride and wistfulness. He had taken things into his own hands; he loved managing people and nursing situations; and up to this all had gone well.

Yet something arrested his thoughts and made him

pause with a little mental start. He had set going a somewhat complicated machine. What would happen now? Teddy in his strength and beauty meant to him something so romantic; Teddy's love for the gentle little Mignonette Lady something so poetic; should he, as gardener, be able to do all that he wished? Humanity is so impotent. For a moment the young man's small face was wan with anxiety. Then, hearing a low sound, he leaned out of his window, and saw at a neighbouring window Teddy sitting gazing up at where he stood — Teddy watching the Mignonette Lady's light. Tommy smiled delightedly.

“Yes,” he said aloud, “it is only the end to the prologue. *La commédia comincia.*”

PART II CHAPTER I

THE comedy, as Tommy called it, in the Italian sense, meaning not a farcical play, but a play of men and manners untouched by black tragedy, began auspiciously. His feeling that he was in a way the magician who had called from the vasty deep spirits who were to lend their aid to his earthly protégés, this feeling of anxious proprietorship Tommy shared with two people.

The Duchess, summoning him to her bedside the morning of Christmas eve, told him in so many words that she regarded him as a conspirator. "You are masterly, but I see through you and your 'beautiful reason,' " she declared, smiling at him from under the lace scarf that disguised her lack of hair; "masterly but also managing. Your great-uncle Oswald used to declare that I had a finger that longed to be in every pie, and I declare that you have. You are a meddling, match-making person!"

Tommy sat down and burst out laughing.

"Match-making?" he asked with obviously artificial ingenuousness. "Now what *can* you mean by that? My great-uncle Oswald was more discerning than you, I fear."

"Get out! You mean the Sun-god to marry the pretty person with the eyes."

"Well?" Unabashed, Tommy helped himself to a bit of toast from her tray and crunched it boldly. "Could anything be better?"

The Duchess finished her tea and set down the cup. "My dear boy, no mortal has ever yet profited a ha'pennyworth by the experience of any other mortal, but I must tell you that match-making is a snare of the evil one. *Moi qui vous parle*, I know it."

"And *moi qui vous parle* agree. Only" — Tommy beamed delightedly at her — "it is such fun, is n't it? Besides," he amended hastily, "I have not plotted to make a marriage; the marriage, humanly speaking, is made. I came here and found it already begun and going strong. All I want to do is — make things easy and pleasant for them. They are," he added, "both such dears."

"Oh, *dears*, yes. And I like her. She is a lady, and she is quiet. Also, she is quite delicious to look at. Who is she?"

Tommy shrugged his shoulders. "Have n't an idea. I believe her name was Blair. Her husband was killed in some native uprising in India. She was very fond of him. But he was, I believe, years older than she. Teddy told me these things. She never talks about herself."

"Any money?"

"Two thousand a year. But *he* has no end, you see."

Poe, her grace's maid, coming into the room to bring the post, pursed her lips disapprovingly at the sight of the plotters. The Duchess might be as old as the 'ills, but there *are* limits, Poe thought.

Poe in her youth had been quite joyously unmoral, but that she had, no doubt, forgotten.

"He's very much in love," pronounced the Duchess, disregarding the woman's presence. "I like to see it."

"So do I," agreed Tommy gravely. Then he burst out laughing at his sententiousness, for he saw his youth and was amused by it in a way unknown to most youngsters.

"How wise I sound, don't I?" he asked with a little chuckle.

"Very. Were you ever in love yourself?"

"Ah no! Not that. I am only three-and-twenty," he returned, suddenly grave.

"H'm! I have known people — however, to get back to our muttons. What will the father and mother say?"

"Say? They'll be delighted, of course. Why not?"

"You never can tell, as Father Bernard Shaw says — such a nice composite name for the two reforming B's, is n't it? They might think her too old for him. She must be seven-and-twenty."

"She is, exactly seven-and-twenty. And he is twenty-four. But what," he added, "*can* that possibly matter? She is so beautiful, and then she is so quiet and — and

good. Teddy," he went on, choosing his every word with obvious care, "is a splendid fellow, but he has of course the faults of his qualities, like everybody else — except thee and me! And the more I see of her the more I am convinced that she is the one woman in the world who can make of him what he is capable of. I mean to say to be such a perfect balance-wheel for him —"

"Chorus girls or cards?" inquired the Duchess disconcertingly, and the foolish Tommy actually blushed.

"What a horrid old woman you are!" he declared with a frown of disapproval. "Who suggested anything so awful?"

"You did n't, but — you meant 'em. So he's wild, the Sun-god, and her rôle is to tame him. Poor thing!" she added drily.

"Jolly lucky to have him marry her, nice though she is," declared Teddy's champion with warmth. "He's splendid, Lanner is, and I love him dearly."

"What an essentially un-British speech! Italy again!"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I mean that the Italian sun, brazen old creature, seems to burn in to Anglo-Saxons who live under him a certain warmth and frankness unknown to us stray stay-at-homes. Pam Lensky was much like you in that way. She spoke in English but she thought in Italian. However, go on. What were you saying? That he was very fast and needed a brake on his wheel."

“Not a bit. That — well, that he loves her and — that if, as I believe, she loves him, she can bring him to the highest possibilities of his nature. And another thing. Miss Lansing, up to this, has not noticed, and do help me to keep her from noticing. She — she’s very fond of Teddy and she likes Mrs. Gilpin, but — if she saw, I’m sure she’d say things — *tease them!*”

He shuddered at the thought, a genuine, anticipatory shudder of horror.

“It would be *too* awful. Mrs. Gilpin is so — well, you know what I mean, so dainty-minded. It would spoil everything for her if Miss Lansing said anything. Do you know what I mean?” he added anxiously.

The old woman nodded. This was the second young thing who had stirred her by a subtle resemblance to the Oswald Yeoland of her youth. The second young thing, and the first was now a middle-aged woman with grey hair.

The Duchess closed her old eyes for a moment. She felt very ancient, as if she were destined to go on living forever, watching young people love, lose their illusions, their beauty, their youth, while she herself remained, as it were, anchored in an amusing but at the same time desperately weary old age. And Tommy realised her mood and liked it.

“You *do* understand,” he said, laying his hand on hers as it lay on the counterpane, “you do, and you will help? Let’s be romantic and old-fashioned, Duchess

dear — you be their fairy godmother and I'll be your — page-boy or something. Let's draw a web of unreality round them, the young lovers; keep the wind from blowing on them, and the rain from raining on them. Let's manage for them, arrange that they may be alone, send them for walks and drives, and win away from the others little wonderful half-hours at the piano — a piano must be a good chaperon — and little quick minutes at windows at night. Let's build for them a wall-less palace in which the dears shall think themselves invisible. That's all they want — to be alone — alone among all of us. It ought to be warm summer with roses, but at least dusky minutes of crumbling fires can be theirs —— ”

He broke off, glowing with delight and beautifully unashamed of his outburst, as he stood holding her old kind hand in his young kind one.

She looked at him, her eyes wet with the ready, unfalling tears of emotional old age.

“ You are a poet,” she said gently.

“ Ah no! I am only a musician *raté* — failed. But the whole world seems a poem when I look at them. Is it a bargain? ”

“ It is, my dear,” she answered. “ Give me a kiss.” And his baby moustache just touched her faded cheek.

CHAPTER II

“WHAT are you not to do, Pammy?”

The young girl laughed but answered promptly: “Not cross my legs; not laugh too loud; not sing; not make a beast of myself over my food.”

Lensky nodded. “Right, oh *ma fille désespérante*. Also control your habit of butting into people in dark passages, and above all don’t ask questions.”

“And don’t bite your nails,” added Pam.

Pammy turned indignantly. “Now, *really*, mamma! As if I ever bit my nails now! However, all my pleasures seem to be forbidden, so perhaps I’d better get out and walk back to town.”

She had a pleasant, wide smile, showing very white teeth, and under a black mushroom-shaped hat her bright hair and red cheeks looked rather charming.

The three, with a small fourth, sat in the biggest of the Kingsmead limousines, the fourth, young Thaddeus, curled up with his nose glued to the window.

“There’s a cow,” he cried delightedly. “I *am* glad to see a cow.”

Pammy laid a large dogskin hand on his shoulder. “Q. K.,” she observed.

“I won’t be called a quaint kid, need I, father?”

Thaddeus, turning, displayed a brown face full of helpless indignation. Pammy was so big that even a great fellow of eleven stood no chance against her. And Pammy was an inveterate bred-in-the-bone tease.

“Shut up, Pammy,” commanded Pam carelessly; “if you tease him you’ll be sent home.”

Pam’s hair was very grey, but she had not grown old. She never would grow old. There are a few such women, and curiously enough they are always women who sincerely do not mind the process. Your dyed-haired, carefully made-up middle-aged young woman never belongs to the elect few who remain, till the day they die, children with children, maidens with maidens, young women with the rest of the world.

For the thing, the growing old and fading of which really matter, is not, as is generally supposed, either the skin or the light of the eye. It is an inner thing, for which no satisfactory name has yet been found, though perhaps “spirit” is the nearest expression of it. And Pam’s spirit was young.

So, laughing and talking, the little party reached the small door in the court at Kingsmead and were received into the warm heart of that hospitable house.

In a second motor, closely following them, came an old, delicate-looking woman in a rather grand black dress and a very bugle-y bonnet, and a rosy, black-haired girl of fifteen. These two were Jane Pilgrim, once Pam’s dearest in the world and still tyrant in the

household, and the elder Lensky child, Eliza, the Duchess's goddaughter.

Convoyed by the attendant sprite Tommy to the presence of their hostess and the Fairy Godmother, the little party was soon seated, with the exception of the grand Miss Pilgrim, round the fire in the hall, eating and drinking and talking.

Mrs. Lansing, busy with her cards, listened to all that was said, put rapid questions, gave rapid answers. She was greatly pleased with the change that had taken place in her household.

The Duchess was charming, the guardsman affable and obviously glad he had come, the novelist was quite as unobjectionable as a novelist could possibly be, and best of all, they all liked 'Enry and brought him out and made him talk, and listened to him when he did talk!

Thus Inez, impressed by the deference paid by the younger members of the house-party to her impossible parents, had begun to lose the anxious look that was so ungracious in a young girl, and to be more natural and pleasant than her mother could remember her ever having been before.

Tommy, of course, author of all this bliss, Tommy had always been perfection. That he was wonderful and comforting she had known from the first; but that even he could at will bring a beneficent rain, so to speak, of simple-mannered swells to check the drought that had so long continued at Kingsmead, she had not dared to

believe. Yet even this had happened, and the Duchess had called her "my dear" twice as they played double patience together!

"You will play for us, Jack, after dinner?"

De Lensky bowed ceremoniously. "With pleasure, Duchess." And it occurred to nobody that the Duchess might have waited until Mrs. Lansing should ask him.

Inez, who was really looking pretty, and to whom the guardsman was making cautious love in the billiard-room, looked out at the merry group by the fire and laughed.

"Is n't he a dear little fellow, Tommy Kingsmead?" she asked.

Captain Sir Wilfred Axendale-Murray screwed into his eye the old-fashioned eye-glass of dandyism.

"Rum little cove, is n't he? Sister drew all the looks, did n't she?"

Lady Brigit, who sat with her hand on the arm of Madame de Lensky's chair, looked indeed very lovely in the firelight. Inez nodded. "Perfectly beautiful," she agreed warmly, for she was happy, and her small nature needed happiness to bring out its savour.

Sir Wilfred shook his head. "Ah no, not *that*," he protested in an appraising voice; "must have been ten years ago though. Too cold to suit me. I like," he added, with a sidelong glance, "more colour and more — *go*."

And Inez laughed, for she had plenty of go when there was anything to go at.

The guardsman was hard up, and the guardsman had expensive tastes. Tommy had known what he was about when he had asked him down, for very solvent, thrifty young guardsmen are at a premium, and had, he knew, been all snapped up for the holidays by the early mamma. Inez was not plainer than most rich girls, the young man thought, and there was only one son. Also, she would no doubt like to be my lady — even if her husband was only a baronet. “And money, I’ll be bound, to b-u-r-n.”

Thus the second wooing sheltered by Tommy’s mild wing.

Tommy himself, crossing the billiard-room, nodded at the two talking over the table.

“Oh, what it is to be young!” he grinned to himself. Axendale-Murray was, he knew, rather an ass, but he was a nice ass, and if Inez pleased him — why not?

“I think I’ll start a matrimonial agency, Duchess,” Tommy began a few minutes later, sitting down by the old woman and taking up a peacock-feather fire-screen. “I seem to have been born for that purpose.”

“Why, my dear?”

“Well — I don’t know. Here’s Axendale-Murray casting the eye of approval on Miss Lansing, and Teddy and Mrs. Gilpin have disappeared and no one noticed,

because I went with them as far as the library to look at the Faerie Queene, which — does n't exist — ”

“ You don't mean to say you have taken to lying to help on your protégés? Oh, don't do that! Telling the truth is so much more original! ”

He shook his head gravely. “ Certainly not. I mean I never lie. Teddy did, though all he said was, ‘ Want to see the Faerie Queene? ’ And — she *is* his Faerie Queene, is n't she? Though I'm bound to admit that that sanctifying thought originates in my mind at this moment. Hello, he's going to play. I have n't heard him for years.”

Jack Lensky had opened the piano, and, his fine, white profile sharply outlined against the dark paneling of the walls, began to play, touching the piano at first in an almost apologetic manner, as if saying to it, “ My dear creature, I know I'm not worthy of the honour, but *do* sing to me a little.” And the piano sang.

He was not a finished musician; indeed, he played entirely by ear; but that ear was extraordinarily correct and fine, and his memory quite remarkable.

So it was very delightful to sit there in the great, softly lighted hall and listen to him. Tommy, as he listened, also observed the other listeners, and he wondered what he should see if he could have read their thoughts.

Lady Pontefract, sitting alone in a deep window-niche,

was leaning back, her face in the shadow, her beautiful mauve skirts spread out like the petals of a huge flower. She of course was thinking of another musician who had played long ago in that room. Tommy knew, and his lips quivered for an instant.

The Duchess? Vaguely he realised that she was far away in her youth, listening to other music.

Old Lansing sat by his wife, his square, thin hand on her soft white one — Darby and Joan in a very modern edition.

Pam Lensky, who did not like music, was reading near the fire, its light dancing on her slim, upright figure and thick grey hair. At last, as her husband played on and on, changing from one air to another, the music affected even her musically deaf soul, for it was he who played, and she dropped her review and turned and watched the musician, a thoughtful smile on her lips.

“Ever heard *that* story?” whispered the Duchess suddenly, glancing at her.

Tommy shook his head, awakened from a dream of blue water and sky and yellow light drenching an olive-green slope.

“I’ll tell you some day. Her romance, poor dear! I never knew it till two years ago, when he died. Then she told me.”

Tommy nodded, and after a moment crept quietly down the room and up the stairs. If *they* were there he

would open the windows so that the music could reach them ——

At the top of the stairs he stood still, smiling with happy tenderness.

The long gallery, hung on its inner wall with dark portraits of his forbears, was lighted in three ways: by one small cluster of electric lights far up in the pointed roof; by a slumberous wood-fire; and by the last rays of a pale sunset that came in touched with glory through the ancient stained-glass windows. A mystic, suggestive, poetic light it was; and near the fire, her white woollen dress rosy with its warmth, her smooth head touched with a golden shaft from the window behind her, sat Nancy Gilpin with Teddy. On her lap she held a great book, and his arm, not touching her, was stretched across the back of the dull-green sofa on which they sat.

They were not looking at the book, and they were not talking.

Their eyes were held by the faint fire, and they sat there in happy silence, together.

Tommy watched them for a moment, and then, turning very quietly, he crept downstairs.

CHAPTER III

WHEN Tommy rose from tucking a fat red-and-black hassock under the Duchess's feet he felt that great progress had been made in his campaign. For here in the old Kingsmead pew, in which he had sometimes sat as a child, he had marshalled his forces, and at one glance he saw that the Green collective eye was beautifully and picturesquely wiped.

There they sat in their pew opposite, father, mother, son, and daughter Green, and with them their countess and their guardsman and their Jewish Welsh financier people. Swells, in a way, all of them, poor Mrs. Lansing would have admitted, but swells in a small way, a less effulgent way than that of those in the Kingsmead party.

The countess, in the first place, was a plain one, and evidently a dull one; judging from her angular genuflexions as the service began, also a High Church one. As a countess, an asset; as a member of a house-party, tiresome.

And even Tommy, glancing from the Duchess's dancing plumes and brave furs to the ancient sealskin jacket and strange bonnet of her unconscious rival, realised that the merely middle-aged lady opposite was in some

mysterious way socially years older than the really ancient Duchess.

The Duchess had gone first into the pew, because a corner and a cushion had been two of the conditions under which her reluctant grace had consented to come.

Then Mrs. Lansing, then Mrs. Gilpin, Teddy, Inez, the guardsman, Pam, and Tommy mounting guard over his little flock. Lensky never went to church, and the novelist was *en mal de composition* and had cried off.

Now the vicar of Kingsmead was of the prosy order of clerics, and his voice like the somnolent buzz of a large bee. The church, heated by a so-called American stove, made in Germany, was unfragrant and overwarm. The village choir, so poetic in verse, is less soul-satisfying in real life, and most of the parishioners were afflicted with bad coughs. So that the service was not remarkable for beauty or comfort. Yet it may safely be believed that there were in the congregation at least five perfectly happy people. Happiness can as little be generalised about as other things, and no two of these five people were happy for the same reason.

Yet in the mind of each of them there was at least a leaven of the malicious joy that the woes of one's fellows are said to cause us.

Teddy, even in the midst of the bliss of a certain look that Mrs. Gilpin had given him as he helped her out of the motor, could not fail to notice young Hubert Green's stare of amazement at seeing the Duchess.

Old Lansing, unselfish in that he would far rather have spent the morning at home but had come to gratify his daughter by flaunting before their enemy their great prize, smiled a little grimly at the expression of old Green's face.

Inez's whole mind was full of the joy of revenge, and, very feminine, she took occasion to whisper a word or two confidingly into the guardsman's ear at a moment when she knew young Green was looking at her. But still dearer to her was the Green girl's stare of amazement at recognising Axendale-Murray. Her guardsman was an unfledged young creature with an imperfect complexion and no moustache at all!

The Duchess was happy because her corner was dark and she might hope, with any luck at all, to get a snatch of sleep while that stupid old parson blundered through his work — and because Tommy was, she knew, full of joy.

As to Tommy, that scheming nobleman was almost shivering with vicarious rapture, for he too had seen the Look at the churchyard gate, and felt that his hopes were to be crowned with success. His feeling of guilt regarding young Green had perished painlessly, and all the *esprit de corps* in him — and there was much — was tingling with joy as he watched the rival factions.

The young lady at the organ, knowing the eye of the world to be on her, played rather worse than usual, which was unnecessary; the children in the choir blew

their noses loudly and at the most inopportune moments ; the American stove glowed like the eye of a dethroned demon and belched forth gaseous hot air ; the crooked evergreen arch at the chancel steps nearly fell down as Mr. Knox touched it with his shoulder on his way to the pulpit.

And then came the sermon : the Duchess dropped quite cosily to sleep, and everyone settled down to undisturbed investigations of his or her own personal problems. Sermons nurse egotism. Tommy, whose mind was now several months farther on, — somewhere about Easter, arranging a very simple but artistic wedding, — caught Hubert Green's eye and nearly laughed aloud.

For young Green had by a single grimace managed to convey to Tommy the question, "How on earth did they get them down? You and I are surprised, are n't we?"

"And as, moreover," droned Mr. Knox, clearing his throat, "this holiday season is dear to us all, and full of innocent mirth as well as of deeper sentiments —"

"Is n't he awful?" whispered Madame de Lensky without turning her head. And because she was just his own age in that mysterious way of hers, he whispered back, "Rotten, poor old chap!" and went back to his planning.

At last the final Amen was said, and the squeaky organ burst into a carolling, rather larky recessional, and at the church door the two factions met.

The Greens could have done no more than bow and pass on, but the captive Countess pushed her way through the crowd and held out her limp hand to the Duchess, who with a very brisk air, as if she had not been asleep for hours, was chatting with Tommy.

"This is a surprise, Duchess!"

"How do you do, Margareta? Yes, is n't it? What on earth are you doing down here?"

Lady Chatterdale looked hastily round. "Oh, I am here with the Greens, *you* know. Algy and Alexandra are in Egypt, and — I'm trying to get Mr. Green to contribute to my little Convalescent Home. It's very tiresome, being here, but I stay in my room most of the time."

"How nice for them," assented the Duchess cordially.

"The motor is here, Lady Chatterdale," called Mr. Green at that moment, coming toward them with "Duchess" writ large on his mean face.

Lady Chatterdale looked imploringly at her old friend. "May I?" she murmured hastily. "He'll like it so much." And the Duchess nodded, and shook hands with the man whose bad beer was a crying shame but whose money was, he was wont to declare, as good as anybody's. He was one of the dreadful vulgarians whose underbreeding expresses itself by familiarity. Compared to him old Analyte Lansing appeared a model of deportment. He called the Duchess "Duchess" at once, asked her how her nephew, whom he called a clever, a really quite remarkably clever young man, was, and

asked her if the music that morning was not the worst she had ever heard.

And for Tommy's sake she suffered him gladly.

Meantime Inez had been talking to young Green, and Miss Green, a pleasant-faced girl, who, judging from her father, must have "taken after" her mother, was chattering with Madame de Lensky. Tommy, the impressario, stood in the doorway watching his puppets dance, and rejoicing that, the day being dry and cold, Nanny had consented to walk home through the firwood with Teddy.

Nanny, in a quaint grey beaver bonnet and some fluffy silver-grey fur round her neck, was very lovely that morning, and it seemed to Tommy that if he had been a young woman loved by the most enchanting of wooers his imagination could demand no time for shy surrender like the hour of walking home from church on Christmas day.

At last old Green released the Duchess and going up to Inez boldly held out his hand. He had refused to let his friendly daughter call at Kingsmead, not only because the Lansings "knew nobody" but also because old Lansing despised him and he knew it.

Yet now, confronted by a Duchess, his views changed. "How do you do, Miss Lansing?" he said; "glad to see you. You are pretty bad about coming to church as a rule, are n't you? We always come. Does the villagers good."

Inez looked at him with a very good imitation of haughtiness.

"Ah!" she said. Then she walked away. "Come on, Sir Wilfred," she said to her splendid soldier, "I don't mind walking, as you want to."

The Duchess, who had taken Tommy's careful arm, gave it a little shake. "Magnificent!" she exclaimed; "are you satisfied?"

"More than. It was perfect. I know young Green, — did I tell you? — and I rather like him. The girl looks nice, too, don't you think? But the old man," he added vigorously, "has a thoroughly evil face."

The old woman, who had taken his arm as she went down the path among the tombstones to the motors, gave a little laugh.

"You the charitable saying that?"

"Don't call me names, Duchess. And you know it is a bad face, even if we were in blessed ignorance about the beer."

"If the beer was so *very* bad they would n't let him sell it, you know," she protested, not because she objected to hearing old Green abused, but because she loved to experiment on Tommy.

But he shook his head as she nearly crushed him to the earth by her weight as she climbed into the motor.

"He keeps within the limits of the law, of course," he returned drily, "old brute."

His small face was quaintly stern as he looked after

the retreating figure of the only person the Duchess had ever heard him say a word against, and there was a kind of sombre glow in his pale eyes that gave the old woman a queer feeling of being in the presence of an unexpected, unknown person.

Yet she had known Tommy since his neglected babyhood.

“You could be very hard,” she said, faltering a little.

Oswald Yeoland, whom she had loved, had never been able to be hard, and she had recognised the fault in his nature.

Tommy smiled at her. “I hope I could,” he said simply.

CHAPTER IV

“LORD KINGSMEAD ——”

“Miss Wantage ——”

“Tommy, then.”

“Hooray, Pammy mine!”

Tommy, who had politely risen from the divan on which, in the room that since it had ceased being a schoolroom had become a kind of lumber-room, he had been lying, smoothed his ruffled hair. In the middle of his smooth head grew a wild and uncontrollable curl, stiff like a small sickle, and this, when the rest of his hair laid down obedient to his master hand, stood up doggedly.

Pammy eyed it and laughed.

“Funny lock. Oh, you are wanted.”

“By whom?”

The young girl eyed him critically. “I heard the Duchess suggest to mother that I might marry you,” she returned irrelevantly, — “when I’m grown up, of course.”

“My dear, if you are going to grow any more ——!”

His expression made her laugh again, and Pammy laughing, with merry dimples in her downy crimson cheeks, was a pleasant sight in spite of her vast proportions.

"Well, I don't want to, either," she went on, vague in her words but quite comprehensible to him as to her meaning. "The Duchess thought Miss Lansing wants to, but she's wrong. She's afraid of you, Miss Lansing is, though I don't see why," amiably, "anyone need be afraid of a dear little man like you."

She spoke with the utmost seriousness, for she had no sense of humour and was a curiously literal person.

Tommy ruffled his hair again and roared.

"Go on, Germania! But who wants me? Why am I routed thus out of my well-earned repose?"

"Oh yes, I forgot. Well, it's this. What's-her-name, the lady with the looking-glass — she's in the gallery and wants you to come."

"Where's Lansing?" blurted Tommy, indiscreet in his sudden anxiety.

"Mr. Teddy has gone for a walk with Aunt Brigit."

Pammy had not caught the significance of his remark, which was lucky.

"All right; will you tell her I'll come at once? I must go and brush my hair."

Pammy nodded and strode solidly out of the room, curiously majestic in her leisurely movements.

"She'll be good-looking some day," reflected Tommy, as he crossed the passage to his room.

A few minutes later he went into the gallery by a small door that was almost invisible in its panelled wall, and found himself face to face with Mrs. Gilpin, who

was sitting in a big chair playing with her little silver mirror, and who started as she saw him.

"I — did n't know there was a door there," she said.

Tommy said nothing, for he having come through the door at that very moment its existence was an obvious fact that needed no verification.

"You wanted to see me?" he asked.

"Yes. Sit down."

He did so, but before she spoke again she rose and going to the fire laid another log on its diminishing flames.

"I like a fire," she murmured, brushing her nervous hands together. Then, sitting down, she folded them over the mirror and looked placidly at him.

"I want to ask you," she said in her gentle voice, "why you are doing all this."

"All — what?"

"Getting the Duchess and the rest to come; and — well, all the things you are doing."

He stared, more surprised than was reasonable. Her quietness had never looked like stupidity, yet, while he had more than wondered that Teddy or old Mr. Lansing had not noticed his benevolent plottings, it had never occurred to him that Mrs. Gilpin's mild eyes might be seeing it all.

"Is it so very — er — wonderful?" he asked.

"No. It is very kind. I think you are very kind.

Also, you are skilful, for so young a man. It has all gone remarkably well, you know."

"Yes — it has gone well. But — why do you think I had any particular reason? It has been a pleasant party — and the ball will probably be a great success. You like dancing, of course."

"Yes."

"Well? "

He was deeply interested, and leaning forward in his chair watched her with an almost menacingly clear look in his light eyes, as she twisted her little mirror, sending flashes of light into his face.

She was, or had seemed, such a pre-eminently passive person; so much a beautiful tool to be handled — most reverently, but still handled — by him for Teddy's good. And now here was the tool asking him questions. It was strangely, vastly interesting.

"I like Mr. and Mrs. Lansing," he began in a hesitating way, as she did not speak; "don't you? "

"Yes." Her eyes met his unwaveringly. "Yes, I like them very much, and I am sorry for them. Inez I do not like. Neither do you. Neither does your sister. But we are all sorry for her, because she is so very unattractive. I understand your wanting to help them all because you are so kind. I think," she ended, leaning toward him a little and smiling at him with gentle radiance, "that you are very good."

Tommy flushed helplessly. With a few words, uttered

in all sweetness, she suddenly brought him face to face with what seemed to him at that moment his appalling, his raw youthfulness.

She was a widow; she was seven-and-twenty; she had lived and loved and lost; and he had been, in his absurd arrogance, trying to help and protect her, to smooth her path!

And all the time she had evidently been regarding him as a well-meaning child.

For a moment he seemed to have lost his footing and to flounder helplessly, wondering if he really were a child. Then, gradually, there came back to him the reverent superiority so often felt by the man not in love for the blissful babes-in-the woods who are.

"Are you laughing at me?" he asked; adding hastily, "No, I know you are n't. But you think me a meddling youth bent on controlling the temperatures of other people's pie with his green finger!"

She shook her head seriously.

"I don't know what you mean. What I mean to ask you is this: are you trying to make a match between — Teddy and me?" She spoke with a visible effort, as though it cost her something to put into words a question her conscience obliged her to ask.

Tommy rose.

"Good heavens," he cried, "you make me feel an utter brute!"

“Ah no, Lord Kingsmead. But — I wanted to ask you — that was all.”

“Well, what do you want to ask me? Now you make me feel, all of a sudden, like an old grey-headed wiseacre.”

The fire, clasping the new log in its little red tentacles, flashed up as it caught a great rough piece of loose bark, and danced gaily in her mirror, which she was still twisting nervously.

“Only this. It is best to speak plainly. Do you think it — wise for a young man to marry a woman who — who is a widow? He is so young, you see, younger than you in some ways ——”

This was true, but it was astounding to Tommy that she should know it.

“Yes?” he said, as she paused.

“And — I am nearly four years older than he. And I have been — sorrowful. Sometimes I think,” she went on firmly, “that he should marry some — something as young as himself.”

Tommy, now quite at home in his new rôle, shook his head gravely.

“Dear Mignonette Lady, — that is my name for you, I hope you don’t mind? — no man is ever too young or too — I don’t know how to express it, but I quite understand what you mean, — for a woman of your age. And if — if — you care for him, as I hope ——”

“Yes? As you hope?”

She rose and going to the fire put her small grey-shod foot on the fender and stood with her face turned away from him. She looked so young, so perturbed, so lonely, that every chivalrous fibre, and there were many, in the young man vibrated almost painfully.

“I think,” he said slowly, “that if you love him as he loves you, he is the most — b-blest man in the world.”

As he finished, a firm, clear footfall came ringing up the stairs, and Mrs. Gilpin turned.

Tears were on her cheeks, and Tommy, tearing open the little door in the panelling, hurried her through and closed it before Pammy appeared.

“Mother wants you — ” began the young girl, adding, frankly curious: “Why, where’s Mrs. Gilpin?”

CHAPTER V

TEDDY'S wooing was a slow one, somewhat to Tommy's surprise. Tommy himself would, he knew, have been quite capable of deliberately lengthening the delicious hour before dawn, as the state of mutual undeclared love appeared to his sentimental mind, for it was obviously a state of exquisitely delicate bliss probably never to be recaptured.

But young Lansing was in spite of his beauty a practical youth, a youth of quiet grip with circumstance and of determined bending of that circumstance to his hand, so that his thrall'd hesitation now surprised his friend.

All through Christmas week Tommy and his now deeply interested Duchess kept watch and ward over the lovers, lest they should be awakened from their dream.

Tommy, suggesting to them before everybody a walk, would start off with them, desert them on some cheerfully transparent pretext, and an hour later pounce discreetly on them as they made their way homeward, so that none but the Duchess ever suspected their tête-à-tête. The old lady, too, who was past master in the art of feigning sleep, sometimes asked the Mignonette Lady, as she, adopting Tommy's nickname, called Mrs. Gilpin, to come to her sitting-room.

"I need rest," she would say, "for I am an ancient old lady, but you, Mignonette, are small and quiet. Come and sing to me."

Then she, sitting in a comfortable chair by the fire in her sitting-room, would listen for a few minutes to the young woman's delightful voice, and then, quietly, but with an evident air of starting from a prolonged dream, would drop her head against her pillow and close her eyes.

And twice it happened that Teddy, sent to the room by Tommy on some ingeniously contrived errand, would enter, in answer to a hushed "come in," to find his lady almost better than alone, as, her guitar still in her lap, a finger to her lips, she whispered, "She was very tired, dear old lady."

That the Duchess deliberately eavesdropped cannot be denied, but the hopeful reader may assume that in case of any real love-making she would have waked up.

For, as she told Tommy, they did n't make love at all.

"She is such a silent person; she sits quite motionless, her hands folded, looking into the fire for the most part (I can see through closed eyelids), and he looks at her. They talk very little for fear of waking this dear old lady, but he looks at her, and very beautiful he is with his heart in his eyes."

Tommy nodded. "Splendid! He never was really in love before, you see, and she is marvellously romantic. I could never fall in love with a muddy-footed cigarette-

smoking, rough-headed girl, either. Women ought to be small and delicate and restful."

"You are a Turk in your soul, Master Tommy!"

But he shook his head gravely. "Not I. But you see, I know Teddy pretty well, and I — I am glad he has had the sense to fall in love with her."

"H'm! Well — he is a deliberate lover. Yesterday he asked her for a sprig of the mignonette she wore at her waistband."

"Ah! Did she give it to him?" Much excitement was in Tommy's face as he put the question.

"Yes. Without a word — with her eyelashes hiding her eyes."

But this very small episode was the only one, in connection with Teddy and Mrs. Gilpin, that broke the pleasant monotony of Christmas week.

The house-party was a great success, and Inez had the gratification not only of being out when the Greens called, but also of being able to refuse their invitation to dine because Admiral Lord Albert Hardcastle, a cousin of the Duchess, had come down to pass the night and say good-bye to his old relative before sailing for distant waters somewhere.

"Cheek of them to ask us, after all this time," Miss Lansing observed to Tommy, looking up from the note she was writing for her mother.

"But you wanted to know them," he answered innocently.

She laughed. "Yes — *faute de mieux*. But now, thanks to you and the dear old Duchess, we don't need them. I know I'm a snob, Lord Kingsmead, but I was dreadfully lonely — and after all I am far better educated than most of the girls around here."

"I'm sure of that," he agreed eagerly, for this was true.

"And as to father and mother — I was wrong about them, but that was because education can't supply — *breeding*. I mean the fact of my having a good education does n't make me well bred inside. You think I don't know, but I do! Now, again, thanks to you, I see that — well, you know what I mean."

He nodded.

"Yes. Your father and mother are so kind and so unaffected, as well as clever, that people like 'em. Now Green is a brute. I can't understand anyone receiving him. Personally, I should n't, but that's because he grinds down his workpeople and because his beer is poisonous filth. Whereas your father — ah, Miss Lansing, think of his having to have a secretary just to answer the letters that came to him to wish him a happy Christmas!"

This story had come out on the unexpected introduction by old Lansing to his guests of a pallid, spectacled youth with moist hands and a nervous trick of sniffing, as "my secretary." Investigation as to this apparition's field of usefulness proved quite fruitless until the

young man himself confided to Madame de Lensky that he had that morning written sixteen letters of thanks, in answer to almost illegible communications addressed to his employer on the glorious occasion of Christmas.

"I am really very tired," added Mr. Holiday plaintively.

"You must be. How very nice of him to answer them all."

"Yes. He signs each one. They are not begging letters. These, he tells me, are attended to by his nephew, Oliver Smith, at the works. And it is, to me, very curious that the letters are written, so to say, from an equal. I mean to say, they all call him 'Dear Henry' — or most of them — and they seem not to realise the difference that his money makes."

"Old friends," suggested Pam; "and he is too nice to outgrow old friends just because he has made a big fortune. He is a dear old man. I do so like him. Only I think," she added, "that he would be annoyed if he knew you told."

"I will not tell anyone."

Mr. Holiday, whose gladsome name accorded so ill with his world-weary aspect, put his thumbs out of joint several times in rapid succession, as if the dampness of his hands had softened his bones and made that peculiar gymnastic exercise easy to him.

"Quite right, quite right, Mrs. Lensky," he murmured, feeling somehow that it would be taking a liberty

to call her "Madame," "but I — it seemed all right to tell you."

The secret, nevertheless, got out, as secrets will, and old Lansing, when taxed with it by his son, nodded shyly.

"Yes, yes. They are my men, and my women. They are n't afraid of me, you see, for it is n't so long since I was one of 'em myself. And a letter means an effort to 'em, too."

He was, these days, blossoming like a rose in the desert, for there was in him not a vestige of real vulgarity, and the wise Duchess and the kind Pam knew just how to treat him. He told little stories sometimes, funny stories, all strictly proper, and his laugh had become very frequent.

Still, he was a quiet, unobtrusive apparition, regretful of his social deficiencies as his wife never was of hers, although she too quite recognised them.

Somewhat to Tommy's surprise, Brigit and the old man really liked each other. That Pam the democratic should enjoy him astonished no one, but Lady Pontefract's indifferent kindness rarely melted, her brother knew, to anything warmer. Yet, possibly because old Analyte's admiration of her beauty was so evident, though always scrupulously unexpressed, the great lady again and again went out of her way to be polite to her official host, and talked to him with an appearance of deep interest that meant, her friends knew, real liking.

Mrs. Lansing, for her part, was backed and braced by the Duchess's love of colour, giving full play to her taste for the gorgeous in the matter of dress.

On Christmas night she appeared at dinner clad in yellow velvet embroidered in gold, in which she gave one the impression of being a heathen altar of some kind.

Another day she boldly huddled together all sorts of colours, so that Tommy told his sister, later, she looked as if she had been struck by a rainbow!

It may be seen, therefore, that Kingsmead was filled, that year, with very happy Christmas folk.

Inez was followed closely by her shadow the guardsmen, who one day proved his fundamental ignorance of human nature by confiding to Tommy that, having a perfectly appalling lot of debts, and the girl being really not so bad, he hardly saw how he could do better.

Tommy's answer to this ill-placed confidence had been a frankly contemptuous stare and a prompt withdrawal from the smoking-room, where it had taken place.

Jack Lensky and his wife, usually together, walked a great deal, although he, fastidious to the marrow, hated mud and wet. The children greatly enjoyed themselves, and, petted by Mrs. Lansing, grew rosy and round-cheeked in the change from fog to real live air, as young Thaddy put it; and Pammy, deep in an attack of adoration for Mrs. Gilpin, fell, in his efforts to

keep her away from the object of her worship, for the greater part of the day, to Tommy's share.

All these people seemed to Tommy much like the arabesques in the border of an old missal; they were bright and vivid in their way, and pleasant to see — ornamental. But their usefulness was limited to that one idea: they were ornaments to Teddy and the Mignonette Lady. He and she, painted with exquisite care, were the real picture, the story; the rest composed a mere border.

Thus the Christmas week sped with pleasant, deliberate haste, and New Year's eve arrived, the night of the ball — a clear, cold, starry night it was, as if the old Year wished to leave behind him an agreeable memory.

CHAPTER VI

Just before dinner, Tommy, who had had a weary afternoon with Pammy, who had been unusually indefatigable in her pursuit of her idol, Mrs. Gilpin, went downstairs to look for a letter that he had left in the great hall. The vast room had been cleaned, and the housemaids had apparently just left it, for the lights were turned out, all but one, and in the window-niches stood huge vases filled with strong-scented, giant crimson roses. It was in its beautiful simplicity one of those rooms that want no decorations, and the one fault in it, a row of ugly Georgian pillars upholding a gallery of the same period, had, since Tommy had gone out of the place after tea, been made into a really lovely bower of smilax and ferns.

Thick garlands of smilax hid the pillars, and the gallery itself, an excrescence due to the bad taste of one of Tommy's forbears, was apparently transformed into a bower of delicate pale green ferns. Tommy's artistic eye at once claimed this bower for Teddy and his fair.

"What *could* be nicer for them," he thought, standing, a rather pathetically small figure, alone in the midst of the vast polished floor, "than to run away from the dancers and sit up there among the greenery — hearing the waltzes, but seeing only each other?" His hands

in his trousers pockets, he frowned intently. "If I can just quietly bag the key," he thought, "I'll give it to old Lanner."

Just then he started, for, looking down at him through the delicate breastwork of foliage, he saw Mrs. Gilpin herself, as if she were a creature of his brain appearing obediently at his thought.

"How did you get up there?" he asked.

"Walked," she answered him in all seriousness; "the door was open. It is lovely — come and see."

He ran up the narrow stair that opened in the paneling, and a moment later stood by her in the lovely place.

Above them the mysterious darkness of the ancient panelled ceiling, all about them the quivering vaporous greenness of the maidenhair. And — there were only two chairs, and on the floor, close to the ferns, four vases of the fragrant roses. For one wild moment Tommy felt in his amazing sensing of the situation that he could for the moment himself be Teddy, and ask, in the character of his friend, Nancy Gilpin to marry him.

"Is n't it lovely?" she asked slowly, sitting down.

"Heavenly." But Tommy wished that Teddy were there in his stead; it was so clearly a case of the time and the place *without* the loved one.

"I am glad to see you alone," said Mrs. Gilpin, passing her hand lightly over a spray of fern that leaned toward her.

"Are you? Why?"

"Because Pammy interrupted us before, and I had n't finished. Do you really think," she went on with a firm resumption of the week-old subject that surprised him, "that it does n't matter my having loved another man? Because," she added with an odd little shudder, "I *did* love him."

She looked very young in the pale light, in her white frock, and he saw that one wing of her smooth hair was a little ruffled, as if she had been sitting with her head in her hand.

"I think," he returned gravely, in a kind of passion of adoration for her, "that you are wonderful. And — I am glad that you loved him."

Her blue eyes met his steadily. "If — if it were you," she asked, "would you feel that way? Things are so different when one judges for someone else."

But Tommy, with the freedom given him by his deep affection for Teddy, laughed. "No, no. I am perfectly sure. If it were I, I should be sincerely glad that you had loved your husband. Only I should want you to love me as much, you know."

She continued to look at him with her peculiarly clear gaze, but she did not speak, and after a moment he continued: "And — as you are so frank with me, you will not mind my asking you — if you *can* love Teddy as much as you did — him?"

"I adored him. I was very young. I was only seventeen, but I adored him."

"How long ago," he asked, laying his hand on the arm of her chair in a kind of reverent caress, "did — you lose him?"

"Five years ago."

"Oh, you poor little thing! You were only two-and-twenty? How — awful!"

"Yes, it was awful. Very awful. I — I nearly died," she added in an undertone, but still looking keenly at him, though a faint colour came to her cheeks.

Ah, if it had only been Teddy to whom she was telling her simple, piteous tale! Tommy was very white with sympathy, and laid his hand on hers as she finished speaking.

"Teddy told me — he was killed in India ——"

"Yes — in what they call a border skirmish. We women who lose our husbands in them call them — battles."

There was a long pause.

To think that she in her exaggerated delicacy could think that this story of her first love could in any way hurt or wrong Teddy!

"Mignonette Lady — you don't mind?"

"No," she assured him with a faint smile.

"I think Teddy, as I told you, greatly blest. And you see I *do* know what you mean — if Teddy were of the small type of man who is suspectingly jealous —

even then, I think, he would regret your first marriage only for you, because you suffered through it. Because — you have through your long mourning lived such a — a cloistered life — that — yes, that is the right word, cloistered — you seem to have regained — girlhood.”

He spoke slowly, in broken phrases, not because he was embarrassed, but because he wished to find the exact words to express his very definite thought.

She held out her hand.

“Thank you, Lord Kingsmead,” she said, with her grave simplicity that he so admired.

Then with another pause, after which he asked, and this time, in spite of his temperamental curiosity, his question was put with a view to solacing her rather than of gratifying himself, “Could you — tell me about him?”

She nodded. “Yes. He was — older than I. So much older that most people thought it must have been his money. But it was n’t. He was gentle to me, though they said he was hard and fierce with others.”

“With his men — I mean the men under him?”

“Yes. He — he loved me. Ah yes, he loved me. But — I had to lose him. I used to think there was no God.”

Tommy sat with bent head. It was very sacred to him, this story.

“When he went away afterward — I used to cry and beat my hands on the floor. I was nearly mad. Then I was ill.”

"What was his Christian name?" asked Tommy suddenly.

She stared. "William. I used to call him Bill. It's not a beautiful name, but I loved it."

"There was a Godfrey Gilpin whose portrait I once saw in London at some exhibition, — I think Shannon did it, — a fair man in full regimentals —"

"No. I have been asked that before. *He* was a Gunner. He was n't one of the Warwickshire Gilpins."

Tommy nodded. "Where were you when — it happened?" he asked.

"At Udaipur. I had just come. We had been in the south for some time, and I was to go to the hills — not being very strong. It was an 'insignificant' battle, I believe," she added, without bitterness; "you'll see it in the papers of the time as 'a slight skirmish in which two officers and eight men were killed.'"

The horror of war overcame Tommy and made him almost sick for a moment, as he watched the poor little victim of the insignificant battle tell her story — the horror of men killing each other; the horror of greed; the horror of savagery.

And yet he was made of fighting stuff, little Kingsmead, and in case of war would have been, such was his blood and his breeding, one of the first to volunteer.

"Dear Mrs. Gilpin," he said, after another long silence, rising, "we must go and dress. It is half-past seven. But — I thank you for — trusting me, and I

hope, oh, with all my heart, that you — that you do — do love Teddy.”

“I told you all that because — I wanted advice. And — you think it not unfair to marry again after — such a story?”

Her exaggerated delicacy appealed to him, although it seemed to him slightly absurd.

“I think it would be wrong to marry if you — if you could not love,” he began, but she interrupted him with an unexpected fierceness.

“Love? Ay, that I can. And I *do*. I think only a few women in the world can, but I am one of them. It — it *hurts* me, it is so intense.”

Gathering up her long skirts she stood by the door looking past him with narrowed, intense eyes.

“Then,” returned Tommy, old-fashionedly, as she started downstairs, “God bless you both.”

CHAPTER VII

LIKE a parent giving a bean-feast for his children Tommy wandered about the house looking to see that everything went well. The responsibility, in itself a joy to him, yet lay rather heavily on his shoulders, for if this ball should prove a dull one, then should he be indeed but a bungling impressario, deserving of instant dismissal; and the knowledge that no matter how hideously he might fail, the household affection assured him a continuance of his incompetency but made things worse.

Even Lord and Lady Leatherhead, "the Marquis and Marchioness," had come, and were at present, having watched the dancing for a few benign moments, playing bridge in the drawing-room with the Duchess and a friend whom they had brought with them, one Major Portrush.

Tommy had placed a screen between the Marchioness' back and the fire, and provided a footstool for the Duchess; after which he had left the room, closing the door to insure the illustrious party the quiet required for their brain-exhausting game.

Then he went to the ballroom, as the hall was called. Perfection apparently reigned there. The tenth dance

was in full swing, and as he watched he saw Inez swinging by with young Green, Sir Wilfred with a martyred air piloting about a local young lady of heavy build, and Mrs. Gilpin and Lensky.

Where, then, was Teddy?

Tommy skirted the wall, brushing the green-draped pillars, narrowly escaping annihilation as Pammy and her partner, the depressed Mr. Holiday, galloped by, and at last found, near the smoking-room door, a worn and bored-looking Teddy, talking to the second Miss Morland, the local doctor's daughter.

"I say, Teddy — excuse me one moment ——" Tommy drew his friend aside, pressing something angular and cold into his hand. "Here's the key to the little gallery. Get Mrs. Gilpin up there — now introduce me to that girl ——"

"Miss Morland, Lord Kingsmead wishes to be introduced to you." Teddy, radiantly smiling, the key in his waistcoat pocket, disappeared in the crowd, and Tommy broke into animated conversation with the second Miss Morland, who squinted, but who, he observed with his rather unusual quickness at seeing the good points of his acquaintances, was blessed with a delightful little Greek nose.

Miss Morland the second adored waltzing (although Tommy, when they tried it, wondered why), and she loved dancing with the young man in the shadow of whose house, so to speak, she had grown up.

They pounded genially round the room two or three times, and then Tommy took her to the buffet and administered to her, with anxious intent of consolation, iced coffee in a tall glass.

“Jolly ball,” she observed.

He nodded. “Very. Good house for a ball, rather — as I may now, alas, say without boasting.”

The second Miss Morland was a little frightened. “Yes — it seems such a pity ——” she began, and then helplessly broke off, licking her spoon.

“Oh no, not a pity. The Lansings, you see, love it. And if I had kept it it would have had to just die — a natural death, so to speak, with no doctoring to keep it alive.”

“I see. Miss Lansing is a lovely girl, is n’t she?”

Tommy glanced quickly at her, but she was sincere, he saw, as he followed her eyes to where Inez, slimmer than usual, clad in pink satin, was talking to young Green.

“She would be an excellent match for — Bertie Green,” went on the second Miss Morland with an abysmal sigh.

“Green! Oh, I say, Miss Morland! Their fathers are n’t friends at all, and they hardly know each other.”

“*Don’t they!*” Her air was that of one initiated into social secrets above the ken of her companion. For the moment she forgot his earldom, and beheld him as a mere stranger.

"They used to dance together in London. He is very intimate with the Lord Mayor's family. And someone told me he admired her very much."

"Bless us and save us!"

"Yes. — *Is n't he handsome?*"

Tommy, who saw no beauty in young Green, was saved answering by the solitary arrival of an elderly maiden, who, driven from her original lair in a corner of the ballroom by the thong of hunger, had defied the ever-ready criticism of a country ballroom to forage for herself.

And Tommy ached for her as he observed her hesitating manner and slightly trembling voice. "How do you do, Miss Marble?" he said, shaking hands with her very warmly. "How strange that I should n't have seen you before! Very crowded, though — that is, fairly so. Let me get you some champagne. How is Mrs. Marble? How well I remember your giving me plums when I was a kid! And is Miss Edith here too?"

It was a God-sent gift, this of remembering faces and names, and the little young man's way of going straight to the point and not allowing embarrassed people time to answer him until they had time to recover themselves, was as surely a real gift. Poor Miss Marble, old and disregarded, flushed with pleasure, and till the end of her days she will talk of the ball at Kingsmead with proud delight.

When, after giving them food and drink, Tommy

convoyed his charges back to the ballroom and found them two chairs, he excused himself with a busy air, and went back to the drawing-room. Things were all right there.

Besides the Duchess's table there were now two others, at which played the De Lenskys, Brigit, the vicar, Mr. Green, and three people whom Tommy did not know.

In a corner, her green leather board on her crimson velvet lap, Mrs. Lansing was busy with a game of patience.

Leaving the room unobtrusively, after a word with his hostess, Tommy went upstairs, and going down a long passage opened the door into the gallery.

Here, too, things could not have been improved upon, for all the window-niches but one were occupied by couples, men and maidens gazing down, as they talked, at the dancers they had quitted.

The lower parts of the stained-glass panes had, for purposes of ventilation, long ago been removed from their cases and swung on central pivots, so that they must, pushed outward as they then were, have looked from below like dazzling bannerets hung sideways.

Going to the one vacant window-niche, Tommy glanced down at the whirling couples below and then, rapidly, toward the little gallery.

It was empty.

Tommy was conscious of a positive pang of disappointment. His efforts, then, had been in vain. He had

locked the door and given the key to Teddy, and Teddy had not made use of his beautiful opportunity. Why?

The whole universe seemed for a moment a great question-mark, and then, with an impatient patience, the young man turned away, and went to find the recreant. As he went back down the corridor he passed the door of the Duchess's sitting-room, and from it came the sound of voices.

"Oh, charming, no doubt," a man was saying, not quite pleasantly. "And of course a guardsman is a guardsman — no one ever doubted that!"

Tommy did not recognise this voice, but it was Inez's that answered with an affected laugh, "A hard thing to doubt, rather, would n't it be? And another would be that he dances far better than anyone else here. It's really *too* delicious ——"

Tommy, naturally, did not pause, but as he hurried past the man returned, very angrily now, "Then it is a great pity to be wasting your time here. Shall we go down?"

It was evidently a quarrel, and Tommy involuntarily wondered who the man could be.

As he reached the short flight of steps leading to the front stairs the door behind him closed with a bang, and he heard Inez say again with the detestable, unreal laugh that he hated, "You really *are* in a bad temper to-night."

Hurrying on, Tommy succeeded in gaining the lower

floor without learning who her companion was, but it struck him, even in the midst of his annoyance with Teddy, as an incomprehensible thing that the to him so fundamentally unattractive Inez could have found a man to torment.

"None of my business who it is," he told himself, "but it is a queer thing." He had reached the ballroom, and at that very moment something happened that put the incident violently out of his mind. He had just met Mrs. Gilpin, who had been dancing, and who turned from her partner to him with evident relief.

They were standing chatting and he was about to ask her what had become of Teddy, when with a quick change of expression she touched his arm.

"Look," she said, pointing to the door. Three men stood there, their hats on their heads, their faces white and menacing. No one spoke to them, but while the unseeing orchestra played on, the dancing suddenly ceased, and the dancers, drawing back from the newcomers, formed a solid phalanx, facing them, as if they, the four roughly clad men, were actors about to begin their scene.

There was a deep silence, and then one of the men, the smallest, the fiercest, cried hoarsely, to no one, or to every one, "Where's 'Enry Lansing?"

As he spoke, old Lansing, who had been in the smoking-room, made his way through the crowd.

"Julius," he exclaimed, "what is the matter?"

The small fierce man stood looking at him.

"This is what 's the matter, 'Enry Lansing," he said slowly: "while you 're 'ere amusing yourself there 's ben an explosion at the works and fifteen souls is killed. Two of 'em," he added, "were my wife — and Joe, 'ere, 'is son. That 's all."

Old Lansing's face turned a curious grey colour.

"Julius!" he cried, and Tommy stepped quietly to him and took his arm.

"Yes. While you 're amusing yourself ——"

"God damn you," cried Lansing, "stop that, d' you 'ear? Stop the music, somebody, and — go home, all of you. I — I will come, men."

CHAPTER VIII

KINGSMEAD knew that he would never forget that night-ride to the town, nearly two hundred miles away, where stood the famous Analyte Works. He and Mr. Lansing left the house just before half-past eleven, in Teddy's big Mercedes car.

The bearers of the bad tidings had been given food and drink and taken to the station, where in an hour's time a slow cross-country train would bear them to the scene of the disaster; but Lansing told them, tears running down his suddenly old cheeks, that he could not wait. "You'll understand, Julius, and you, Joe Evans," he said, taking a hand of each of the afflicted men. "They were a-working for me, they were my friends, and — I must 'urry."

The men nodded. They had come unreasoningly, all but one of them dully and uncomplainingly, like children coming to a parent. And the one exception, the man Martin, a badly balanced, ignorant turner-over of half-understood grievances, suggested to him by socialistic writings, had come to accuse the rich man of being rich in the poor man's hour of tragedy. Yet even he had been set right by old Lansing's distress.

He was dazed and silent now that his frenzy of anger

had died under Lansing's distress; and he and his companions sat in the smoking-room among the tables, on which still stood several siphons and brandy and whisky bottles, and where on a low chair Tommy found and put into his pocket a frivolous long white glove forgotten by its owner.

The dreadful tawdriness that even the most innocent scene of revelry wears when grim tragedy has stepped into it seemed to blemish the room, and Tommy quietly moved the chairs back into their places and put the dissipated-looking siphons and bottles together on a table in a far corner.

The story was told in a few words. The foreman of the place had offered extra pay for extra work that evening, to meet some large order, and something, Tommy could not quite grasp what, or how, had exploded, killing fifteen people, three of whom were women.

And Julius Martin, always a rebellious, jealous-hearted man, had, against the wishes of his comrades, insisted on coming himself to tell his employer the bad news.

Joe Evans, a gentler spirit, his brother-in-law, had come with him, chiefly to try to quiet the man's furious state of nerves, and the two other men had come, Tommy gathered, more for the ghastly fun of the thing than for any other reason.

Confronted by Lansing's grief, however, these two were disappointed, for his misery, so personal, so far

removed from mere sympathy, was so strong and compelling an emotion that even Martin was awed, and forgot his bitterness and jealousy in watching it.

"My men, working for me, God 'elp me!" Lansing said, over and over, as they waited for the motors to come round. Outside, on the half-frozen gravel of the courtyard, carriages and motors hurried up amid a confusion of voices to take away the guests so rudely dismissed by their host.

Tommy, when the four men were safely shut in the smoking-room, and Martin's wrath had melted into mere human misery, returned to the ballroom and found everyone on the point of leaving.

Mrs. Lansing, Madame de Lensky told him, was crying herself to a jelly in the drawing-room, her tears blotching and ruining the two new packs of patience-cards initiated that evening in honour of the occasion; Teddy stood talking to Mrs. Gilpin, whose face was whiter than Tommy had ever seen a face; and Inez, looking very shocked and troubled, was with the Duchess saying good-bye to the guests.

The Marquis and Marchioness, kindly, simple people, returned, when their carriage had come, to the drawing-room to say a last word of sympathy to the Duchess, and Tommy saw that it was as he had expected.

Not one of the guests had taken in bad part old Lansing's outburst and dismissal. People are kind, after all, to misfortune. The Duchess, old as she was, her white

wig askew, her ancient face haggard, was worth gold in the emergency, for even the small people went away cheered by a ducal word, thus assuring to the ill-fated ball an at least pleasant *envoi*.

Away they went, then, the revellers, in motors, carriages, and flies. And before they had all gone, while yet some twenty were huddled in their cloaks awaiting further conveyances, the big whirring roar of the Mercedes was heard, and Tommy put on his coat.

"Tell Teddy to go to his mother, will you, dear?" Lady Pontefract came out of the drawing-room as he passed it. "She is dreadfully upset, and he may be able to quiet her."

Teddy, obedient to a hurried word from his friend, left Mrs. Gilpin, with whom he was still standing, and hurried to his mother.

"Go to bed, Mrs. Gilpin," suggested Tommy, "you look dead. I am just off — with Mr. Lansing."

"Poor old man!" she returned. "Those men were *dreadful*."

"Yes. They, or rather the one, was not polite. But never mind that. Try to sleep; and remember," he added with the ghost of a whimsical smile, "that every morning you read in some paper of far worse accidents, and go on eating your eggs and bacon. This was just brought — unpleasantly near to you."

She looked at him vaguely. "Yes, of course," she added, and he knew that she had not been listening. "When will you get there?"

"I don't know — early to-morrow morning, I suppose."

"But — why do you go?"

"Why? To see Mr. Lansing through. Besides, there are many wounded people, and some one must see about nurses, etc."

Her bright blue eyes changed. "Ah yes, nurses——" she began, but he had hurried on, for old Lansing and the four men were coming toward him. And Tommy, to avoid the people who still stood at the front door, took them all five, quite unresisting, out at a small door near the billiard-room.

The motor that was to take the four men to the station, ten miles away, at which they could get a train stood in front of the other, and Tommy, going to the chauffeur, told him to go back to pick up his cargo.

When the machine had backed away from the confused group of motors and carriages struggling to get to the front door, Tommy spoke to the French chauffeur.

"Mr. Lansing and I will join you opposite the car-pond," he said; "he does n't want to say good-bye to anyone."

The man nodded. "*Bien, milord,*" he said, and Tommy turned back.

"I am coming with you, Mr. Lansing," he said to the old man, whom he found alone, watching his work-

men as their motor started off. "Teddy is with Mrs. Lansing."

"Yes, yes, my lad; thank you. Teddy would not do. Blood sickens him, and we shall 'ave to face lots of blood."

Tommy took his arm and led him unresistingly back into the billiard-room, upstairs, through the gallery and the long passage, and then down the back staircase through the kitchen, which was empty save for a pretty scullery-maid being made love to by the odd man.

"Jacquart is waiting for us near the carp-pond; let's hurry."

Old Lansing nodded. "Yes, yes. Let's 'urry. They were my people, working for me. I used to do the same work, not so long ago. A-a-h!"

His long, gasping moan was so full of pain that quick tears came to Tommy's eyes.

"Have you a warm coat on?" the young man asked.

"Ay. My coat is lined with fur. I am warm and comfortable, whereas they ——" It was that most rare thing — an almost anarchistic sentiment expressed by a prosperous man. If he had been poor and cold and someone else wearing his handsome coat, his tone could not have been more bitter; and Tommy realised the thoroughness of character that had brought this uneducated man untouched through success.

Ahead of them, in the moon-shadow of a large tree, stood the big motor, waiting. Off to the right, in the

pale moonlight the old carp-pond glittered faintly; and the sound of horses' feet and motors filled the cold air.

Tommy helped Mr. Lansing into the tonneau and got in after him. Then, as he wrapped a big fur rug round the old man, who sat quite passive, his brows pulled down over his eyes, Tommy started.

Someone — a mere shapeless bundle of fur — sat by the chauffeur. As the motor sped down the avenue the bundle turned.

"You must n't mind my coming," Mrs. Gilpin said; "you will need a woman, and I am not afraid."

"But — it is an awful journey, and — there will be dreadful things to see," faltered Tommy, appalled. "Please go back."

"No. I do not fear dreadful sights," she returned quietly. "I had n't time to change, but I have a dress in my dressing-case. Please don't fuss."

"But — there will be plenty of people to help — it is a big village — and you are so — so ——"

"Be quiet," growled old Lansing in a surly voice. "Let her come; it won't hurt her. She is right. Why should *she* be spared any more than them as work?"

CHAPTER IX

LOOKING back on that unforgettable night journey, Tommy's mind always paints for him a long light stripe through blackness; a moving circle of red light, dark bare trees and hedgerows; a pale moon shedding paler light; and ahead of him, outlined against the red light, Nancy Gilpin's little form shapeless in her furs, all but her head, which, in its well-pinned-down motor-cap, was curiously distinct and characteristic.

Twice Tommy fell asleep, once to be awakened by loud talking, to find Jacquart the chauffeur angrily demanding of a drowsy man in a cottage window which turning he must take to get to the next town on his map.

The next time he awoke the moon had gone and a strange pallor in the sky meant dawn.

Lansing apparently had not stirred from the attitude he had taken on getting into the car, and Mrs. Gilpin's small head was as erect as ever.

"I have been asleep," announced Tommy, moving his cramped legs.

Lansing nodded. "Yes. That yonder is — the town. On the 'orizon."

The motor sped on, climbing low hills without faltering, dashing down them at breakneck speed, continuing

all the time its low murmur as if it were talking to itself to keep up its courage as it tore on and on through the night.

And then, at last, the town: an ugly, grimy, manufacturing town that would have been a village but for its factories. The hideous brick chimneys standing against the paling sky looked like giants' fingers pointing accusingly at the God who allowed them to exist.

It was the first day of the New Year, and the town was silent as the travellers reached their goal.

And fifteen human souls who yesterday, at the same hour, had gone to their work looking forward to a long rest to-day, lay dead.

Tommy shuddered. He was very tired, and he was also hungry, though he did not know it.

It was half-past four when the motor rushed in between huge black gates at the far side of the town and drew up with a jerk at a low flight of steps on both sides of which stretched a long line of lighted windows.

Lansing got out, and quite disregarding his companions, went into the building.

Tommy crawled from the encumbering rugs and wraps, and going to the front seat of the motor took the rug off Mrs. Gilpin.

"I am quite stiff," she said, trying to rise.

"Let me help you."

"Attendez, milord, je vais descendre madame."

Jacquart the surly jumped down from his place, but

before he could come round to the steps she had risen, and placing one hand on the seat, the other on Tommy's shoulder, sprang lightly out. "I can't bear to be touched by strange people," she whispered as they went up the steps.

The bare corridor was empty, but a light at the head of another flight of steps led them to a room from behind the closed door of which came voices.

"You had better wait," Tommy suggested. "Sit down and I'll go in and see."

He opened the door and went in.

The room was a large one, and its use was evidently that of a kind of office, for there was a big desk and a safe in it. In its squalid cleanliness burned a double gas-jet, and behind a small group of people at its farther end Tommy saw five or six mattresses on the floor.

One of the men standing near them turned as the door opened, and Tommy saw that he must be a doctor — a worn, harassed face with an authoritative look on it.

"What do you want?" he asked sharply. "That door should have been locked. If you are a reporter you may — go."

"I am not a reporter. I came with Mr. Lansing. My name is Kingsmead, and I want to be of use — if possible."

The other man's face cleared.

"Afraid of — ugly sights?" he asked.

"No."

“Then — move out of the way, Mrs. Jenkins, please, and ——” to Tommy again — “help me dress this burn, will you?”

Tommy, taking off his coat, knelt by the boy on the end mattress.

“It’s an ugly business, as you can see — give me that cup of oil, will you? — don’t bother, he’s quite unconscious ——”

The other people in the group were two work-worn elderly men and a half-fainting girl with beautiful curly red hair that looked flauntingly, cruelly out of place in the sad room.

“Those two at the end are dead,” observed the doctor. “These are their people.”

Suddenly a man left the group and kneeling by one of the mattresses began to sob hoarsely.

It was very painful.

“Take your girl away, Jacob,” said the doctor, rising, after laying on the raw chest of his patient a thin layer of oil-soaked cotton-wool; “she’ll faint in a moment.” He spoke roughly and without looking up, but Tommy knew that he was exhausted with hours of harassing work, and was sorry for him.

“Thanks, Mr. — I’ve forgotten your name. That’s all I can do here; will you come with me to the next room? These,” he added as they went out into the passage and turned to the left, “are the ones who were too bad to move. Four, as you saw, are already dead. The other one will probably die.”

“And — the dead ones? I mean those who were killed outright — Martin’s wife and Evans’s son?”

The doctor glanced at him. “Taken home — what could be found. They were pretty well blown to bits — hello, who is this?” He had opened a door as he spoke, and they stood on the threshold looking at a curious scene.

In a small room, one side of which was completely taken up by a large iron furnace, lay another of the piteous, shabby mattresses hastily brought, Tommy knew, from the nearest houses; and on the mattress lay a naked child, while beside it, the crude gaslight glaring full on her white-and-silver evening frock, knelt Nancy Gilpin, busily engaged in pouring, from a broken blue-and-white tea-cup, oil on the poor little creature’s raw chest.

By her lay a roll of cotton-wool, and something in her way of supporting the faintly groaning boy with her left arm while her right hand let the healing oil roll over the dreadful hurt, caused Tommy, as well as the doctor, to wonder.

“The woman who was looking after him got sick and had to go,” Mrs. Gilpin declared quietly; “she would have fainted if she had stayed. Would you mind holding his head?”

Kneeling, the doctor did as he was bid, and the young woman, deftly preparing a thin layer of oil-soaked wool, laid it on the child’s chest.

"It's a bad burn," she remarked critically, "but I think he'll pull through. Where can I find a shawl or something for him? His clothes are ruined ——"

"Would you," asked the doctor, addressing Tommy, "mind going downstairs, to the first door to your right, and asking Mrs. Golightly to give you some covers?"

Tommy obeyed, finding Mrs Golightly without any trouble and obtaining from her an old green plaid shawl, which he brought back without wasting any time in words.

As he opened the upstairs door again, he heard Mrs. Gilpin say carelessly, in apparent answer to a question from the doctor, "No, thanks, I'm not at all tired — I used to be a nurse — Bart's."

Then, as Tommy handed the doctor the shawl, she looked up and met his astonished eyes.

"Yes," she repeated with a faint smile, "I really did, but I never told you."

It was a strange scene, and her beauty, delicate and elusive, had never before seemed to him so exquisite as they went together from squalid room to squalid room, each of them doing the best they could to alleviate the awful suffering they found at every turning.

The worn-out doctor, glad of quiet, competent help, led them even to the great hall where the accident had taken place, and it was a very solemn and dreadful sight.

The dead and wounded had been removed, but the wet

floor was still covered with blood and fragments of stuff, and the walls spattered and blotched in a horrible way. Tommy shuddered and his chin shook convulsively.

His was a high-strung nature and he suffered rudely that night, but his courage was good, and he as well as the others worked unceasingly until broad day stared in at the great dingy windows.

Mrs. Gilpin, still in her ball-gown but with some working woman's crude red shawl now wrapped about her, was of varied and great assistance to the doctor.

At last, as the factory clock struck seven, the doctor rose from where he had been kneeling by a dying man, surrounded by the man's family, and looked at her.

"We will now," he said, "go to my house and have breakfast. Ah!" Crossing the room to the window in two strides, he put his arm round Tommy and slid him gently to the floor.

Tommy had fainted.

CHAPTER X

DR. COLE lived in a small house on the top of the gentle eminence that, lying to the north of the sluggish river that ran through the town, was called the Hill, and which was where the few gentry of the busy place had their dwellings.

As he was a bachelor the doctor's old sister kept house for him, and very well she did it, too.

Even there on the Hill a constant war with blacks and dust had to be waged, for the town was direfully dirty, and the house of Admiral Kennedy himself, he of five house-servants and a carriage and pair, looked a little dingy. Whereas Miss Martha Cole's white paint was as white, her chintzes as fresh as if the little house — Laurel Lodge was its poetic name — had been buried in the green depths of Devon.

So Tommy, poor exhausted small Tommy, when his faint was over, opened his eyes in a lovely little bower of a room all pink roses and white varnished furniture, and saw bending over him a little old lady with white hair and the whitest cap ever seen out of a fairy tale.

"*I am so sorry,*" cried Tommy rather loudly, for fear of speaking weakly. "*I am awfully ashamed — where am I, please?*"

Miss Martha patted him.

“You are at Dr. Cole’s, and you fainted at the Analyte Works, — after being a perfect little hero, George said, — so we brought you here. And the lady is having breakfast, and you shall have yours at once, now that you ’re all right.”

Tommy sat up. They had put him to bed, and he found to his amusement that he had on, for the first time in his life, an old-fashioned nightshirt with narrow red braid as trimming. “You are very good to me — Mrs. Cole?”

“Miss,” corrected Miss Martha composedly. “Mother died long before you were born, my dear.”

“I beg your pardon. It was a rather exhausting night,” he explained, “and I am a wretchedly delicate little brute, after all.”

He sighed, for he was greatly disappointed in himself. Only a fortnight before he had pranced, he reflected, proudly along the road to Brigit’s, boasting to himself that he was well and strong and could do the things that other young men could; and here he was going off in a dead faint like a silly little ass, and being a perfect nuisance instead of the help he so longed to be.

“Where is Mrs. Gilpin?” he asked after a pause.

“She has gone out — with my brother. The nurses have come, but George says she is worth a dozen of them. Now if you ’ll just lie still, Mr — the lady forgot to tell me your name ——”

Tommy explained, greatly pleased that Nanny *had* forgotten, and the good lady continued: "I will bring you a nice bowl of soup and some toast, and then you must try to get a sleep."

But Tommy had no mind to waste time in trying to sleep, so when his kind hostess had left him he darted across the passage, wrapped in a blanket, took a bath, and when she returned, was nearly dressed and stood by the fire trying to smooth down the rebellious curl on his crown, that seemed that morning to be particularly devilish, as he said to himself in Italian, in which the word is musically so successful that it sounds rather like a term of endearment.

Miss Martha Cole had had orders from her brother regarding her guest, but she was an intelligent old woman and saw at a glance that Tommy meant to have his own way.

"Very well," she agreed promptly, "if you must you must. Only it is a bitterly cold morning and you are pretty well tired out, and you must at least drink your soup like a good — like a ——" she blushed prettily at her own slip, but Tommy smiled at her.

"Like a good boy? Very well, I will. It looks very good indeed, with the sprig of smilax in it."

"Smilax? It's parsley," cried Miss Martha, delighted, and she continued to smile while the young man swallowed the soup and ate a bit of toast.

"You'll find the houses of the poor things the far

side of the factory. You go down the hill, and turn to your left, — you can't mistake the High Street — and then at Bellingham Avenue you turn to your right and go straight on. It's about a mile from here. My brother and Mr. Lansing are going from house to house — it is all dreadfully sad. Henry Lansing is a good man, and he has never gone away from his own kind."

Tommy flushed. This phrase filled him with a real happiness, for it so exactly expressed old Lansing. That was what it meant, the old man's bad English, his social blunders, what his son, truly loving him, called his social impossibility. He had not grown away from his own kind.

And Tommy saw behind the discomforts and small annoyances involved by the old man's faithfulness its great and simple beauty.

He had made a large fortune. He could, had his motives been other, have long since made himself into a more or less successful "gentleman" in the shallow sense of the word; but he had, Tommy now understood, not done it because he had not chosen to. He, the working man, had not chosen to grow away from his own kind.

Therefore the old man's harmless vulgarity, his in-offensive lack of manner, became at once in the eyes of the little gentleman who had always liked him, and now nearly loved him, not a weakness, but a strength.

It was such an illuminating phrase, that of the little

old lady, it settled so many things in such a beautiful way, that Tommy would have liked to put his delighted arms round Miss Cole and hug her.

Not that he had needed enlightening regarding Lansing. No, he with his sensitive antennæ had at once realised the old man. But Miss Cole had put into his hand a beautiful weapon against those who scoffed at Lansing; she had writ across the heavens in large and glorious letters an explanation of the man's being that it seemed to Tommy no one could refuse to accept.

"He has never grown from his own kind!"

Tommy's crooked smile held Miss Cole's attention by sheer force of the happiness it expressed.

"You — I *am* so glad you're better," she murmured, incoherently, not at all knowing why she felt as she did, or why she so greatly liked the boy.

"So am I. And — I can't tell you how grateful I am to you. Oh," he added, bursting out laughing, "not only for the soup — but — well — I can't explain. I just — so I — liked what you said about Mr. Lansing."

"I've forgotten what I said," she answered frankly, her candid young eyes, so sweet in her old face, fixed on his, "but he is a fine man."

A few minutes later Tommy was on his way down the hill, a little shaky on his legs, but greatly uplifted in spirit, as if he had just been listening to fine music.

And it was well that he was thus caught up in the clouds, for sad sights awaited him.

The crowds of excited people in the street showed him without words which way he was to go, and when he reached the long double row of little houses in which the Analyte workmen lived, even the grotesque element of tragedy was not missing, and it, of all, is the saddest.

"'E 's in there, Lansing is," a man told him, pointing to a door before which stood a small coffin, while the boy who had brought it was knocking. "Been up all night. Bill 's an old friend. And Bill 's missus wanted a white coffin for the child — though there ain't much left of it to put into a coffin."

Tommy shuddered. "I don't quite know about the accident. I came last night with Mr. Lansing, but — we were too busy to ask."

"Boiler burst and blew 'em up," explained the man laconically. "Nobody's fault. Some of 'em tried to make out it was, but it was n't. Sooner or later boilers do burst."

Tommy looked curiously at his imperturbable face. "None of your people hurt, I suppose?" he asked.

"No. Good reason for that — ain't got no people. The young lady is in there too. She's got a lot of nerve. Most ladies faint."

Something in Tommy's face struck him, for he added slowly: "Are you the young gentleman as — was n't well?"

"I am the young gentleman who fainted," returned Tommy with deep shame.

The man nodded. "They said you were very brave and — useful, sir," he said, "and you don't look over strong."

Before Tommy could answer the door of the house opened and Mrs. Gilpin appeared and said a few words to the boy with the coffin, whose knocks had hitherto been unheeded. When she saw Tommy she came down the path toward him. He never forgot her face as it was then. She was very pale but quite calm, and the corners of her mouth were deep-set and firm. He could see that she had been working hard, that she was very tired, but that in spite of her tender heart she was, in the midst of suffering and pain, in her element.

The little slight creature was that rarest of women, a born nurse.

"Are you all right?" she asked, giving him her hand.

"Quite. How is — he?"

"He is — with them. Going about from house to house — mourning with them, poor things, and that helps more than anything else. He is very splendid, Lord Kingsmead."

"Is he in here now?"

"Yes. It — it was the only child. The father's nearly crazy. The mother — well, it is very hideous, but perhaps it helps her through — the mother is drunk."

"Oh!"

This hurt Tommy, and she saw it and smiled, a quiet nurselike smile for the weakness of the untrained.

“Will you come in?”

He followed her, wondering how he could have been so dense as not to see from the first that her beautiful serenity was in part at least the result of training.

In the cottage he found Lansing sitting by the fire with the father of the dead child. Both men sat with their heads in their hands, but Lansing's left hand lay on the other man's knee.

As the door opened the other man looked up.

“That 's not a parson?” he asked harshly.

“No, no, Bill. No one shall come whom you don't want.”

The boy who had brought the coffin went out, and Tommy stood leaning against the door, sick at heart, as the old phrase so wonderfully expresses it.

On the bier in the corner lay, a small thing covered with a green plaid shawl. The clock ticked cheerfully, and in the silence a brutish sound came from the next room — the sound of drunken snoring.

Mrs. Gilpin, after a short pause, went to Lansing and touched his shoulder. He rose and came to her.

When he saw Tommy his haggard face melted to a half-smile. “You must go,” he said gently. “They don't want strangers and you can't help. Even *she* can't help.”

He put his hand on each of theirs, all his shyness gone. He was master here, master by nature, by belonging to the people, and his worn face expressed the gratitude of an officer to his good soldiers.

"I want you both to go home now," he said. "Tell my wife I'll stay with them. It's my place."

Even Tommy, usually understanding, might have protested, asked to be allowed to stay, to try to help, but Mrs. Gilpin answered at once.

"Very well, Mr. Lansing, we will go. Good-bye."

"Good-bye. And thank you. Thank you both."

He was polite as well as grateful, but he wanted to be rid of them and showed it plainly.

So with a last look at the poor little form on the bed Nanny opened the door and they went out.

CHAPTER XI

"It seems rather like deserting the ship," remarked Tommy as they opened the gate and turned to the left among the little knots of excited people who stood talking over the horrors of the accident.

Nanny laughed. "That's the amateur point of view. As a matter of fact we are simply obeying orders, which is the fundamental law in most things."

Her little brisk air sat oddly on her, but he recognised it as her nursing manner, and he liked it. He knew that he should never forget seeing her working among the stricken people through the long hours. It was a new side of her beautiful character, and he reverently loved it. There were so many loving and lovable things about her, and each one endeared her to Tommy for Teddy's sake. She would so help Teddy, so bring out the good that was in him, so encourage his good points and minimise his bad ones. Tommy would have given half his little income for that year if the comfort-loving, ugly-sight-fearing Teddy could have seen her tending the dying and wounded the night before, her lilylike gown stained with blood and darkened with the dust of the floor she knelt upon.

"Have you a sister?" he asked suddenly.

She looked at him, her eyes wide with surprise. "A sister? No. Why?"

"Because — I wish you had." He blushed.

"But why? I never even had one, so I don't miss her."

"I know. B-but I was thinking I wish you had one just like yourself and that I might m-marry her," he answered bravely.

Her face was very gentle and she did not smile. "That is a great compliment, Lord Kingsmead, and I fear you think far too highly of me."

"No, I don't. But I like you so much, Mrs. Gilpin."

Suddenly he saw that she had no hat on.

"Where is your hat?" he asked, aghast, for it was cold.

"I left it at the factory last night — forgot it. It does n't matter, but I must buy a cap of some sort before we go back. I want to go in here for a moment; will you come?"

The cottage was a very poor one, and inside the door three women were talking loudly.

When Mrs. Gilpin and Tommy entered they turned and stared, hostile.

"I wish to see Mrs. Carney. How is she?"

"She's asleep — you'd better not go in — it's twins."

"I am a nurse, so I will go in. And please," she added with her air of quiet authority, "do not talk so loud."

Tommy, making himself as small as possible, stood with his back to the wall watching. He was *de trop*, but Nancy had brought him and so he stayed.

The three women on hearing that she was a nurse lowered their voices, and one of them offered Tommy a chair.

Presently the inner door opened and Mrs. Gilpin reappeared, bearing in each arm a small flannel bundle.

"A boy and a girl," she said to Tommy; "*lovely* babies — look at them."

And Tommy being a male thing was rather appalled as he inspected the small mulberry-coloured faces in her arms. The babies, he thought, were very horrible to behold, but all the manhood in him stood at attention and did reverence to the womanhood in the Mignonette Lady as she stood there smiling down at the new-born little creatures. She looked so strong, so tender, so motherly — something in Tommy's breast leaped, turned over, and fell with a queer sensation that made him almost faint for a second.

"P-poor little things," he stammered, laying his hand on one of the bundles, "how — s-small they are."

"Yes," she returned seriously, "twins are usually smaller than single ones. Are n't they dears?"

Bending her smooth black head she kissed one of the babies very delicately, and went back into the other room.

So that was the way women feel about babies!

Tommy's eyes were a little wet and he stood looking at the fire for a moment. He was a very sentimental person.

Five minutes later Mrs. Gilpin came out and took him away.

"I must go and buy a cap," she said, "and then we'll start back at once. The car is at the inn, the Grey Rat. Odious name for an inn, is n't it?"

They went quickly back to the High Street, almost in silence until Tommy burst out, "I say, Mrs. Gilpin, I am awfully ashamed of fainting last night!"

"I only wonder that you stood it so long. The smell of burnt flesh," she added, "is so unpleasant."

"*You* did n't faint!"

"No. But I was in a hospital for two years."

"So I heard you tell Dr. Cole. Was it — before your marriage?"

"Both. We were very poor at first. When we were married I had been in for a year, and I stayed on for nearly another. Then he came into a little money and we were ordered to India."

"Did you like it? Nursing, I mean."

"Yes. I like sick people."

"I saw that you did," returned Tommy. "Ah! this looks like a shop where you could get a cap. I'll see if I can knock them up."

After five minutes' loud rapping a woman opened a window over the shop and was told what they wanted.

"I can't sell things to-day," she declared roughly; "it's agin the law."

"Not to-day? This lady spent the night at the Analyte Works, helping the doctor, and forgot her cap there. We are going home now, in a motor, and if you won't let us have a hat of some kind she'll have to go bareheaded."

"Dear me! Wait a minute and I'll come down."

A moment later the two were in the shop, and a flat grey cap was chosen, which Tommy paid for.

"'Orrid accident, was n't it, sir?" asked the shopkeeper curiously. "They say it'll be in the London papers. Legs and arms all over the place, I'm told, and a little boy with 'is 'ead blowed clean off."

Tommy shuddered. "Oh, *don't!*" he answered impetuously. "We saw it — or much of it, and it does n't bear talking about."

"I beg your pardon, sir."

The woman was abashed, and held up a scrap of a mirror in silence while Mrs. Gilpin pinned the cap on her smooth hair. It was a very common shop, filled with all sorts of cheap and unlovely articles of apparel, and one side of the wall was lined with huge pigeonholes full of Berlin worsteds, crude reds and greens for the most part.

Tommy looked around as Mrs. Gilpin pinned on the cap, and just as they were about to go two women in dark blue cloaks and bonnets came in.

Mrs. Gilpin, a slim grey figure, pressed back against the gay worsteds to make room for them, when suddenly the second of the two, staring hard at her, exclaimed, "Why, Aileen Donovan — what are you doing here?"

Mrs. Gilpin looked at her gently. "There's some mistake," she said, "my name is not Donovan."

The nurse blushed. "I beg your pardon. My name is Nurse West — Jessie Hart — and I thought you were an old friend of mine. I am very sorry."

Mrs. Gilpin smiled at her. "Not at all," she answered. "I mean, it does n't matter a bit. You have come to look after the poor people who were hurt last night?"

"Yes, madam." The nurse's change of tone was almost ludicrous. "There's been a baby born and I'm looking for baby-linen for it. Nurse James, here, is after cotton-wool; the chemist is out of it."

Mrs. Gilpin nodded kindly. Hers was a wonderfully kind face, Tommy thought for the hundredth time.

"Will you lend me a sovereign?" she asked Tommy.

He gave her the sovereign and she pressed it into the hand of the still embarrassed nurse. "Buy some little thing for the poor baby, please," she said.

Then she and Tommy left the shop.

CHAPTER XII

“FATHER and I,” declared Pammy, rushing to the motor, as toward six o’clock it stopped at the door, “*are the only ones left!*”

Mrs. Gilpin, whose hand was being held by the young girl, smiled at her a little vaguely. “Are you?” she asked.

But Tommy, as he helped her alight, put the illuminating question: “What has happened?”

That Pammy was in a state of most pleasurable excitement was plainly visible, and at such moments her future prettiness seemed to get the better of her bulk and insist on recognition. Her crimson cheeks were less red than usual, her eyes bright and dark, and her wind-blown silky hair very charming indeed.

“Well, you see, they have all had an attack of aversion to type — that’s what father calls it. But do come in and have tea, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

Leading the way to the great hall with a semiconscious air of hospitality, she helped Nancy Gilpin get out of her coat, kissed her noisily, took off her fur gloves, and paying no attention to Tommy’s statement that they had had tea an hour ago at a wayside pub, made the travellers sit down by the fire, which she poked

with an air of giving a solemn person a dig in the ribs and telling it to cheer up.

“Well, go on — we’re dying to hear the news,” said Tommy, much amused by the young girl’s manner as well as really curious to know what had happened.

Then Pammy sat down, the poker still in her hand, and drawing a deep breath, began:

“Well, poor Mrs. Lansing was awake all night, and when she woke up it was eleven o’clock!”

“How could she wake up if she was awake all night?”

“You know what I mean. And she was dreadfully upset about her husband’s being there without her. The Duchess tried to comfort her, but could n’t. Mr. Teddy spent all his morning looking for telegrams — from *you* — and when none came he got frightfully cross, and even mother thought him rude. Then at last Mrs. Lansing decided to go too — I mean to Ramsbury. The Duchess thought it nonsense, but Mrs. Lansing told her she did n’t know what she was talking about, and that they were her people, and she had worked in a factory herself, and so on. So at twelve Mr. Teddy and she left. Poor Mrs. Lansing seemed quite helpless without Mr. Lansing, but she would go.”

Tommy nodded. “And the Duchess?”

“The Duchess was going to-morrow anyhow, you know, so she decided to go to-day instead. She gave Mrs. Lansing her own handkerchief at the last moment, for she had lost hers — Mrs. Lansing had, I mean. And

when Mrs. Lansing cried so awfully she patted her on the back — the Duchess patted Mrs. Lansing. Well, the Duchess being so old mother would n't let her go alone with Poe, so mother went with her. They went to Lady Yeoland's — they wired first to see if it would be inconvenient, and mother is coming back to fetch us to-morrow. Then Lord and Lady Pontefract went home too, — I've forgotten why they went — and — Sir Wilfred left an hour ago!"

Tommy burst out laughing. "Why did *he* go?"

Pammy's large face lengthened with mysterious importance. "He went because — because Miss Lansing refused him!"

"Good gracious, Pammy, what an appalling person you are! How can you possibly know that?"

The tea, which had arrived, stood unheeded on the table, even Pammy forgetting it.

Mrs. Gilpin lay back wearily in her chair, gazing with half-closed eyes into the fire.

The reaction from her night of painful hard work had set in soon after they had left Ramsbury, and for the greater part of the journey she had been quite silent. Tommy looked at her anxiously as he put his amused questions to Pammy.

"I *know*. Because," declared the young girl cheerfully, "I *heard* him!"

"Heard him? You little brute, you've been eaves-dropping!"

Tommy rose disgustedly. "Don't say another word, we refuse to listen to you. Come, Mrs. Gilpin," he added gently, "you must go upstairs and rest. I'll tell Miss Lansing that you are too tired to dine."

"No, no, I am not tired. I am far stronger than I look, Lord Kingsmead. Please don't worry about me. I'll go and see Inez, poor girl."

Taking up her gloves, she left the room, and Tommy turned to the extremely discomfited Pammy, whose round eyes were, he saw, full of tears.

"Don't howl," he said cheerfully, "but keep your crimes to yourself. I *will* have a cup of tea, after all."

Pammy winked hard to keep the tears from falling.

"You need n't have been so beastly," she muttered, sitting down at the tea-table; "I'm not a sneak."

"All right. We'll call it an accident, — three bits of sugar, please, — but you must n't tell me, please. Where's your father?" But Pammy was possessed of a vast though gentle pertinacity, and intended to tell her story.

"He's playing with Eliza — with her electric railway, upstairs. They were here and I came down the stairs from the gallery. I was n't walking quietly ——"

"Oh!"

"Well," she asked with great indignation, "do I *ever* walk quietly?" And he, with a laugh, was obliged to admit that her coming was always heralded by almost elephantine footfalls.

“Well — and they just did n’t hear me. It was n’t my fault. I heard him say would n’t she reconsider, that he loved her very —— ”

“Oh, chuck it, Pammy, if you have any decency,” interrupted Tommy. “Can’t you see that you are being a bounder in telling?”

“No, I can’t. And she said,” the girl continued, as unmoved as a bale of cotton by a charge of duckshot, “that she would n’t. I told the Duchess, and she said, ‘The girl is a fool,’ for it seems he is well born and so on, and he *is* in the Scots Greys! I,” biting meditatively into a jam sandwich, “am going to marry a naval officer.”

“Why?” asked Tommy, relieved at the advent of a new topic.

“Because they ’re always away. Oh — well, the next thing that happened was Mr. Green — the young one — called and took Inez for a walk. That was at four, and they are still walking. Father says young Green is a very nice boy. Inez is n’t bad, either. She gave me a string of corals the other day. But I prefer pearls.”

Tommy rose, laughing.

“No accounting for tastes, is there? Did my sister leave no message for me?”

Pammy jumped nearly out of her chair and began rummaging in her short serge skirt for a pocket.

“Oh yes; what an idiot I am — she left a letter.

Here it is — I hope you don't mind its being rather squashed."

Tommy took the letter gingerly. "It's a moot point in law," he said, removing a small lump of some sticky yellow substance from the back of the envelope, "whether this piece of toffy belongs to you or to me — or even to her! However, I am a generous young man, so I'll cede the point."

Pammy took her toffy, looked at it doubtfully for a moment and then not unregretfully threw it into the fire. Tommy meantime was reading the note.

"DEAREST L. B.: Ponty is what he calls too fed up for words, so we are off. Pam (or probably the voluble Pammy) will tell you the news and why you and Mrs. G. will find the house empty but for Inez. It was very sad last night, and to-day things have been worse.

"The Leatherheads are dining with us to-morrow, as their friend the Irishman wants to see Ponty's buffalo-hide. Won't you and Inez and dear little Mrs. Gilpin come too? Do. Heaps of love.

"BICKY."

Pammy was watching him closely, her face, in its loss of animation, heavy and almost dull. "Why did *they* go?" she asked, but obviously not much caring what the answer to her question might be.

Tommy laughed. "To make little girls ask questions. Ah! here they are."

But Inez Lansing came in alone, and sinking down into a low chair asked Pammy to give her some tea.

"I'm sorry all this has happened," she began abruptly. "It was nonsense for mother to go. They will all be horribly embarrassed by her, and I told her so. Those people want to be by themselves when they are in trouble."

Again Tommy wondered who was the woman whom she so obviously was imitating. Whoever she was the young man knew he should detest her.

"I can't imagine," Miss Lansing went on, taking her tea from Pammy's large white hand, beside which her own, thin and small and dark, looked like a monkey's, "*why* she went."

"I know," declared Pammy.

"Why, then? "

Tommy tried to speak, but it was too late.

"An aversion to type."

Inez stared for a moment and then flushed a deep red.

"Aha! And who told you that? "

"Father."

"You have n't got it right, you little goose!" burst out Tommy, sincerely sorry for the elder girl as he watched her. "Miss Lansing, do have some cream in your tea — that looks poisonously strong."

"No. It may be another case of reversion to type," she returned bitterly, "My liking black tea. They always do."

Swallowing the tea hastily she rose without another word and left the room.

“You are a little horror, Pammy,” declared Tommy, seriously annoyed. “You should n’t repeat what you hear, and you should n’t use words you don’t understand.”

“I ’m sorry. Did n’t mean to make her angry, but you have n’t any right to scold me. Besides, what did I say? ”

Pammy’s large face was crimson and her eyes full of tears.

“Well, you ’ve hurt her feelings and you have been meddlesome, which is a perfectly horrid thing to be.”

“Shall I go and tell her I ’m sorry? I ’ll tell her I don’t know what it means —— ”

Pammy’s humility touched Tommy, who laughed ruefully.

“No, no. Let bad enough alone, my dear. But *never* repeat things, Pammy, it ’s awful — it is n’t cricket.”

Pammy wiped her eyes, in default of a handkerchief, on her sleeve.

“Oh, Tommy! But I won’t, *indeed* I won’t!”

CHAPTER XIII

THE next morning Tommy went for a long walk after bidding the Lenskys good-bye, and did not come back until dressing-time. The evening before had been dull, but not so painful as he had expected, for to his surprise Inez had appeared much as usual at dinner, and talked most peacefully with Lensky, who, quite innocent of the fact that his amused remark had been repeated by his sharp-eared and indiscreet adopted daughter, met her with a kind question about her father.

Jack Lensky was considered one of the most charming men in London, and his smooth, fair face with its permanent monocle and his seraphic pale-green gaze was well known to everyone who, as the phrase goes, *was* anyone.

He spoke many languages, his discretion was absolute, his devotion to the beauty of women never involved him in the toils of a devotion to any woman, and he and his wife were cited in these days of cheerfully accepted infidelity as a model couple.

Tommy, whose capacity for admiration was so very great, had ever since his little boyhood been devoted to the dapper little Pole, and in his impersonal way Lensky was fond of him.

The younger man had as a boy frequently visited the Lenskys when they lived in the country, but of late, since Lensky's position at the Russian embassy had grown in importance, they lived altogether in the old house in Little College Street.

Three years of their married life had been passed on the Continent, two of them in St. Petersburg, but they both loved England, and in spite of hints from high quarters that an ambassadorship might be the reward of a few years' more patience, he had retired from the diplomatic service, and accepted a permanent position of some more or less undefined kind at the embassy.

So Pam Lensky was at last a real Londoner.

Mrs. Gilpin liked Lensky, and he and she talked about Russia at dinner that night. She had been there and had liked it. She looked very tired, in spite of her asseverations to the contrary, and her voice dragged with weariness, dropping at the ends of her sentences as if with relief.

Inez and Tommy upheld a desultory and quite uninteresting conversation, and Pammy, who had received a very sharp scolding from Tommy, sat enveloped in gloomy silence. So that everyone was glad when dinner was over, and the evening was shortened by an early withdrawal of the two women, Pammy having disappeared immediately on leaving the dining-room.

So when Madame de Lensky arrived in the morning, Tommy bade them all good-bye and went for a walk.

He was not a walker in the real sense of the vain-glorious word. That is, he sometimes did other things too, and even at times would not take a real walk for days — if he was busy with an interesting book, or if it was dusty or wet. He hated dust as the Utopian parlour-maid should, and the wet hated him and caused his Wretched Beast, as he called his delicate health, to stir uneasily.

But there were times when only an overlong tramp could rest his mind, and that second of January was one of them.

So off he started under a threatening grey sky, and turning to his left on leaving the park gates climbed a steep path to the downs, from the top of which the sea was distantly visible.

“I wish I were at the Castelletto,” he remarked aloud to himself; “there is probably daylight there.”

He could, as he marched on over the rapidly softening ridges of the yesterday icebound road, see the little high-perched pile of grey stone; the grotesque prickly-pears stretching their contorted arms in the yellow sunlight; the brilliant, Japanese-looking fir-trees silhouetted against the vivid blue of the wide-spreading sea.

“The wallflowers are green by this time,” he thought regretfully, “and irises all over the place! And in the garden under the wall — violets. Oh, *paese beato!*”

And, shocked and hurt as his sensitive organisation

had been by the awful sights he had seen the night before the last, the little rocky promontory, grey and green and sunny, did indeed seem to him to be a blessed land.

If it would not, to his peculiar mind, have seemed, in spite of the fact that he was bound to England by no duties, cowardice to go away he must certainly have fled to Italy that very day. It would be bad to leave his sister, but — he could always come back; and without attempting to analyse feelings the recognition of which would have caused him keen self-scorn, he felt that that was home — the Castelletto — and that here, in the cold grey land where awful things happen, he was a kind of voluntary outlaw.

He was, in fact, suffering from overstrung nerves, but he knew only that things were going aghley, that the world was out of joint, and that something menacing seemed to be waiting for him, hidden behind the immediate hours.

If Tommy had had a wise mother she would have kept him with her that morning, talking of cheerful, indifferent things; and without his suspecting it, she would have seen that he did not sit in a draught, eat anything indigestible, or hear anything harrowing. But his mother was dead, poor soul, leaving behind her a record of variegated unwisdom and futile passions, and so the young man was walking, chilled and depressed, over the downs, looking without interest at the grey

sea, so different from the blue one he wanted — and needed.

When he reached home, tired out, he had but just time to dress for dinner, and then he and Inez and Mrs. Gilpin set out together for Pomfret Abbey.

“I saw Lady Pontefract to-day,” Inez announced, as little Nanny sat down between her and Tommy. “I was in the chemist’s shop and she came in. She wondered you had not been to see her.”

“No — I — just tramped. I am going to stop with her in a few days, you know. Perhaps,” he added, “I had better be there when Mr. and Mrs. Lansing come back.”

“No, no. Oh, please! You will make things so much easier — if you don’t mind! Father will be very savage, poor dear, and mother — is so fond of you. You are,” she added in her gentlest voice, “a *very* comforting person.” Tommy sighed silently. “Isn’t he, Nanny?”

“Yes. That is because he is so kind,” Mrs. Gilpin answered, laying her hand, in the darkness, for one instant on his arm.

And somehow Tommy felt better for her little friendly caress. After all, he thought, she really did need him, and so did Teddy. Teddy, poor darling fellow, must be having an awful time at Ramsbury. He was utterly and hopelessly out of place among the people from whom he had sprung, and his consciousness of it only made matters worse.

Poor little Mignonette Lady too! She as well must be feeling lonely to-night, with him so far away.

Tommy's tense nerves yielded a little at this thought.

After dinner he would take her to see something in the library and cheer her up by talking about Teddy. During the rest of the dinner he chattered gaily, succeeding at length, to his own delight, in making both the women laugh with real enjoyment, and the homesick vision of the Castelletto receded comfortably into the back of his brain.

CHAPTER XIV

POMFRET ABBEY was a depressingly large house, and its dining-room, a huge place, sombre and magnificent, was Brigit's *bête noir*, although it was, in its way, too perfect to be altered. So on ordinary occasions the Pontefracts dined in what was called, for no particular reason, the white dining-room.

This room, while not white, was light-coloured and cheerful, besides possessing the peculiar characteristic of being perfectly round. Its dull blue hangings, broken by three windows, made a becoming background, and the round table gave to small parties a feeling of particular confidence and cosiness.

It was in this charming room that the dinner that night took place, and everyone, sitting down, felt a little pang of pleasure.

Lord and Lady Leatherhead had at the last moment been unable to come, but their guest, Major Portrush, in whose honour the party had hastily been arranged, was there.

Pontefract, after talking for a moment with Mrs. Gilpin, drew his little brother-in-law aside.

"Tommy — Joyselle is dying."

The young man started, and he glanced hastily toward

his sister, who, dressed in white, was composedly chatting with a tall girl with dyed hair — Miss Clark of Welland Park near Pinchbroke.

“Dying?”

“Yes. Théo wrote. The letter came this morning. I asked her,” the kind man went on, “if she did n’t want to put off the dinner, but she did n’t. After all,” he added cheerfully, “she has n’t seen him for years.”

“Oh, that ——” Tommy began, and then stopped short.

“Does n’t matter, you mean? Well, Tommy,” Pontefract returned, his hand on Tommy’s shoulder, “you are wrong. Years do matter, so do even months. She — you know Brigit, she never was afraid of the truth — told me to-day that — that — well, he was the only one, really, but — she is fonder of me than you’d think. She saved me, for one thing.”

“I know.”

Pontefract’s protruding eyes followed his wife with a very pathetic expression as he spoke. “I don’t think she’s unhappy,” he added.

Tommy, touched, smiled at him.

“No more do I, Ponty. She is certainly very fond of you. But — it must have been a shock to her, all the same. You did n’t know him. He — he was splendid; I loved him too.”

Then he crossed the room and slipped his arm through his sister’s.

"You have heard, dear?" she asked, walking to a window with him.

"Yes. Ah, Bick — it is sad ——"

"No. It is — good. I am glad, Tommy. Théo is there, and he — he sent me this — and oh, Tommy, his blessing. Théo wrote that he mixed me up with his nieces until the very last, and then he remembered, and — begged my pardon, and said it was all his fault. And would I forgive him — I! — and — would I wear — this?"

Tommy remembered the big diamond ring that hung on a thin chain round his neck. Joyselle had worn it on his right hand, and before Brigit and he had known the great man they had seen the thing flash on his finger as he played in the concerts which were then driving sober-minded, emotional London mad.

"Ah, Bick dear!"

"Yes, Tommy — it's Amen. I — I am glad. I could n't bear to think of his suffering, and Théo says he does n't suffer now. It — is a beautiful letter. And — it was wrong, but — it was n't wicked in itself, dear. And I still — do, you know — I always shall."

He had never before so clearly understood her loneliness in the midst of her luxurious surroundings. She had not, on losing the man she loved, turned to good works, except to the good work of marrying and saving Pontefract; she had lived the usual life of people of her class, travelling, enjoying, spending money. But

Tommy knew now that she had, like the red Indian to whose glorified type people had so often compared her dark beauty, been all through the years silently enduring. Without religion, without children, without vanity to console and occupy her, the woman went, and would continue to go, her way, stoically enduring.

"Darling old girl," her brother began, but at that minute dinner was announced, and he could say no more. Tommy, placed between Mrs. Gilpin and a young man named Boscawen, a cousin of Pontefract's, was very silent during the first part of the meal, while his sister and Boscawen talked cheerfully about Pam Lensky, whom the young man knew and liked, while Ponty, delighted with Mrs. Gilpin, as he had been during his short stay at Kingsmead, was telling her quite frankly how pleased he was to have her next him that evening.

"You will sing, won't you?" he added, smiling at her.

"Yes, with pleasure."

She wore black, and Tommy was sorry, for he loved her best in white and grey. But at her throat, hanging by a delicate platinum chain, hung a large pear-shaped diamond which he had never seen before, and which gave her a quaintly travestied air, as of a nun in worldly attire.

"Sing the song about the wind and the barley," went on Ponty, leaning toward her, his red face beaming.

But that was Teddy's song and must not be sung in Teddy's absence.

"No, no, Mrs. Gilpin," broke in Tommy abruptly, "*please* not that one. Sing the Spanish thing about the fan."

She turned and looked at him.

"Don't you like the Greek song?" she asked, and it seemed as if there were in her gentle voice a hint of reproach. It was, she seemed to mean, her favourite song; did he, then, not like it too?

"I like it, ah yes, I did n't mean *that*," he assured her as Pontefract turned to speak to Inez; adding in an undertone, "but — it seems like Teddy's song, somehow. And he, poor fellow, is not here."

To his great happiness her pale cheeks flushed a delicate shell-pink at his words and she dropped her eyes.

"You are very — thoughtful," she returned.

"Yes. It makes me happy to think of people I love, and Teddy — *gli voglio unfran bene* I bear him," he translated, whimsically, "a great good will."

She did not look up in answer, but the shyness in her drooping face was enough to satisfy even his exigent loyalty.

Boscawen's voice, as he talked to Brigit, broke the dreamy spell under which Tommy sat for the next few minutes.

"It was a very brave sight," Boscawen was saying. "He simply sprang under the great horrible thing and dragged the child back into safety. It was a miracle they were not both killed."

Lady Brigit, her most beautiful that night, an unusual look of softness in her dark eyes, bowed her head.

"That shows that people are not so bad even yet," she answered. "I don't mean you, Hal, of course — but that the people were so touched by it. Even very mean people seem to thrill back at a deed of great courage."

"Right, my dear," agreed her husband eagerly. "I remember a chap once telling me about an escaped convict, long ago, in New South Wales, coming out from his hiding-place in a barn and going into a burning house to save an old woman who was bedridden. The crowd recognised him afterward, but they never laid a finger on him and he got off scot-free."

Major Portrush, a brown-faced man of fifty, sitting on Lady Pontefract's right, lifted his wine-glass and looked into it thoughtfully for a moment.

"The bravest deed I ever saw done," he said slowly, "was in India — in a little battle near the Afghanistan border." Something in his voice was very arresting, and Lady Pontefract turned toward him.

"Tell us the story," she commanded gently.

Dinner was drawing to a close, and little pink ices stood before each guest.

Major Portrush emptied his champagne-glass, wiped his large moustache with an upward gesture, and began, amid a slight silence that grew in intensity as he went on, until the whole room seemed breathless.

In a few well-chosen words he described the position of the lonely little border stronghold, the long, rather enervating peace that had lulled the suspicions of the men within it, and — the alarm in the night.

“No one dreamed of an attack,” he said sternly, all the superficial gaiety gone from his face; “we were supposed to be on peace terms with the prince, who, indeed, we afterward found, was altogether against rebellion, and forced to it by rebellion among his men.

“It was a cold night — we were very high up — and I, for one, was sound asleep, when suddenly the buglers sounded the alarm.

“In ten minutes’ time we were firing down into a crowd of black devils mad with fighting, and utterly unafraid of death. There were between thirty and forty of them to one of us, besides.”

Tommy watched the story-teller as he went on, his terse, technical details brightened and warmed by his Irish sense of words, his power as *raconteur* stimulated and strengthened by the eager attention of his audience. The room was vibrantly silent now, and the little pink ices, like forgotten roses, faded unenjoyed.

“Suddenly,” the Irishman went on, with a dramatic gesture of his strong brown hands, “crack — the flagpole was struck and down it hurtled away from us among those devils. One of our men — a soldier — ran down and opening the door was out among them like a shot. He was drunk with blood — as *they* were, the

niggers. And just as he reached the place where it had fallen, over he went, struck by a bullet."

The narrator paused, conscious of something more, greater, to come. Tommy, glancing to his left, caught sight of Mrs. Gilpin's hands, tight clasped on the edge of the table, so tightly clasped that they looked bloodless and stiff.

Horried at what he knew she must be suffering, he was about to speak, when Portrush, now with a strong brogue, hurried on, telling how one of the officers, a cool-headed, silent man, untouched by the fever of battle that had urged the soldier to risk his life so uselessly, had gone down among the fighting quite quietly, and picking the wounded man in his arms, started back.

"The niggers were driven back at that moment by a terrific rain of fire from our men, but it was only for a moment, and just as he reached the door, which was ready to open for him, down he went on his face, shot through the back, God save him!"

Mrs. Gilpin was as white as the table-cloth, Tommy saw, and under cover of the exclamations that followed the story, Tommy laid his hands on hers, which, still tightly twisted, now lay on her lap.

"Drink some wine," he whispered. "*I am* so sorry."

"Oh yes, dead as a door-nail," finished Portrush. "We buried him there at sunrise. I shall never forget his dead face. Rather fine it was. He had a great scar on one cheek that had always rather disfigured him, but

after his death, somehow, it did n't show. At least it did n't seem to matter. His name was Gilpin — Bill Gilpin — and he was a gunner."

Everyone started, and Lady Brigit hastily rose, with a warning glance at Portrush.

Tommy had his arm round Mrs. Gilpin, for she was, visibly, barely able to sit upright.

"Damnation!" growled poor terrified Pontefract under his breath. "I say, Brigit, this is awful!"

Portrush turned helplessly to Inez, who stood, as she had sat, on his right. "What is the matter?"

"He was her *husband*."

"Her husband! But ——"

"Hush!" said Tommy authoritatively. "Come, Ponty, take her other arm, will you?"

CHAPTER XV

IN the flower-filled drawing-room Nancy Gilpin soon recovered herself. Tommy, forgetting that he, as a male thing, had no right there at present, sat by her couch and held near her face a big engraved glass smelling-bottle, while Brigit opened a window and let in a rush of cool air.

"I am so sorry, dear Mrs. Gilpin," Brigit said over and over again; "the poor man of course had never caught your name."

And the poor Mignonette Lady smiled tremulously and answered, each time, that she was sorry to have been so weak.

"It was a splendid story, though," suggested Tommy at last, putting down his smelling-bottle and gently chafing one of her cold little hands. It was the one with the wedding-ring on it, and he thought, as he touched it, of the poor hero who had put it where it was and then, only five years later, ridden blithely away to his death.

She nodded. "Please — don't talk about it, Lord Kingsmead."

So he stopped, and sat silently by her whom he felt to be, in Teddy's absence, his charge.

Brigit, at the far end of the long room, stood by the fire talking to Inez and smoking a cigarette. The window was still open, and the coolness was pleasant.

On the low chintz-covered couch Nanny's little black figure lay quite quiet, her face as pale as the pillow on which it rested. Only, as she breathed, the great diamond on her bosom rose and fell, sending out flashes of crimson and green fire.

Tommy was greatly distressed, and as he sat there his peace became gradually disturbed by a dreadful fear. It came so quietly, the fear, with the relentlessness of a slowly moving great force. If she could be so moved, after nearly five years, by the story of her husband's death, could she possibly, he wondered, really love Teddy as he deserved? And if not, it seemed that the world would come to a piteous end.

It is hard to say why Kingsmead loved, as he certainly did love, young Lansing. Teddy was a handsome, truth-telling, clean-lived youth; but beyond that there was little to be said about him. He was remarkable in no other way whatsoever, and what is more, Tommy realised it. Yet his affection for his friend closely approached adoration, at times, even while he perfectly recognised Teddy's limitations.

And as he sat there by the woman Teddy loved, there began in his breast, even while he gently rubbed her small soft hand, something very like resentment against her for the woe she might be going to work, something

curiously akin to jealousy of the poor dead man for his friend.

He was glad Teddy had not been there that night, and yet — if she could never really love him, he might as well know it.

Suddenly, without moving, Nanny spoke.

“Do not be angry,” she said, very low, so that Lady Pontefract and Miss Lansing did not hear her. “I — I could not help it.”

Looking at her he saw that great tears stood in her eyes. “Oh, I — am *not* angry, please don’t cry. It is only that — that — that — it all went with *him*. Oh, I am not blind, and I can see.”

“You think I can never love again. Well, you are wrong. I love now far more than I ever loved him.”

She still spoke in an undertone, but the intensity in her voice was such that he turned, half alarmed, toward the others.

“I loved him, yes, but — that is over and gone, that love. It is dead. And this,” she laid her hand on her heart with the gesture of a child or a very great actor, “is alive. I love as women love, not as children do. Ah yes, I love, I love, I love!” Rising all in one movement she went toward Lady Pontefract.

Tommy was dazed, and the backs of his knees twitched, as was always the case with him when he was greatly moved.

She was splendid, more splendid even than he had dreamed. And Teddy — oh, thrice blessed Teddy!

He was standing looking idly and quite unseeingly at a little ivory idol that his sister had brought from Kioto, when the other men came in.

Major Portrush joined Tommy at once.

“I say,” he began abruptly, “I am awfully sorry to have upset Mrs. Gilpin so. I had n’t heard her name, and besides, I thought his wife died just after he was killed. I do feel such a brute. Will you tell her for me some time, when she’s — quieted down again? Poor little thing!” he added kindly. “I have his watch, by the way, and must give it to her. I was sent off just after the row, you see, and took it with me. Tried to find his wife, wrote letters and all that, and then the story got about that she was dead. The watch I have locked away somewhere. He had just joined us, sold out from some smart regiment, they said, because he was hard up. A queer, silent chap, who never mentioned his own affairs. Afterward — no one was ever sure that he was married, though some of us had heard it from outside sources, and then — we heard she had died of the shock.”

Tommy nodded.

“All right, I’ll tell her some time. I say — she’s going to sing!”

And she was.

Sitting at the piano she struck a few chords sharply,

as if to attract attention to her song; and then, to everyone's amazement, for she had always said she played badly, broke into a very complicated accompaniment, which she played with remarkable accuracy and fire.

It was an Hungarian song full of rather stereotyped surprises in harmony, but she sang it well, and with a greater power of voice than any of them had ever before known her to possess.

Then, without pausing, she began the Greek song.

Tommy stood facing her, and she seemed to be looking with her wide-open eyes full into his face.

The chill air from the open window blew across him, a bowl of roses smelled strongly, the fire snapped quietly, and the audience stood listening with curious intentness to the beautiful little song.

“Oh, how I loved thee, Atthis!”

How he had loved her, the dead hero; how she had loved him — “a thousand years ago.” Tommy's heart thumped tremendously. Yes, to all intents and purposes it had been a thousand years ago, for there had been no mistaking the passion in her voice when she said, “I love, I love, I love!”

And now, in singing, she loved. She was alive, the little quiet creature, every fibre of her, and as she sang she showed, voluntarily, proudly, it seemed, a side of her nature that he had never seen before.

“Did we falter when love caught us in a gust of wild desire?”

Tommy's eyes glowed as he watched her, for he knew she would not falter.

No, she would not falter. This, as had been the sight of her at the factory, was a new phase. Tommy had often heard her sing, but always to the romantic soft chords of the guitar, and it had seemed an old-fashioned, rather quaint little accomplishment — the echo, almost, of a real string — the memory.

It seemed, now, as if that other singing had been the reflection of her love for her dead husband, for the dead are not loved as the living are; it was a tender reminiscence of singing, that other, a mild souvenir of finished things. Whereas this was pregnant with present emotion.

The thumping of Tommy's heart would have warmed an older man, but in his innocence he listened full of joy for his friend.

Her heart was not buried there in the little hill fortress; it was living and beating now with a strong present feeling. She loved, and her song was expressing without reserve the force and vitality of her love.

“Did the barley bid the wind wait in its course?”

Everyone listened tensely, and when she had finished her song she played on for a moment, and then, as if irresistibly impelled to do it, began it again:

“Oh, how I loved thee, Atthis!”

Tommy glanced at his sister. Lady Pontefract sat in a high-backed chair, listening with bent head. Alas, poor Brigit, vivid music is not good for such as her.

But Tommy's mind was at that moment capable of only the passing tribute of the thought.

What held him was the voice at the piano — the small, usually so reserved face against the background of palms and ferns — Teddy's Mignonette Lady.

No one in the world was at that moment more beautifully happy than Tommy, in his unselfish affection. And then it happened, the inevitable. Or possibly, he never knew which, it was simply that he at that moment realised a thing that had happened days before without his knowledge.

And for a moment he caught at the arms of the chair in which he sat, and held his breath while he whirled through horrid black space.

It was very awful, and it took, the revelation, this form. He saw, as if some malignant hand had suddenly held it before his eyes, a photograph that Pammy the inquisitive had brought from Mrs. Gilpin's room to show him.

A man's face, strong, purposeful, and ugly.

And there was on it no scar.

CHAPTER XVI

KINGSMEAD never could remember which of the two great shocks came to him first, as Nancy Gilpin sang the Greek song: the knowledge that he loved her, or the knowledge that something was wrong, that she was not what she seemed.

He remembered walking out of the open window into the cold garden before the last note of the singing voice had died away. He remembered walking very briskly, as though he had something important to do there, to the East Lodge, quite a quarter of a mile from the house. He remembered going slowly back, with dragging feet, to get his coat and hat, for the pitiful reason that he knew if he walked home without them he would take cold and be ill. He remembered sending a polite message of excuse to his sister by the butler. And — he remembered the long dark walk home — to the home that was his by tradition and love, but no longer his in reality. Many slightest details of his walk he never forgot — the clear barking of a distant dog; the striking of a church clock; a motor thundering past him.

But whether he first knew that Nancy Gilpin was a swindler, or that he loved her not as a friend, not as the future wife of his dearest friend, but as a man loves the

woman he wants for his own, this he could never decide.

He remembered the meeting with the nurse in the shop at Ramsbury, and the quiet voice in which Mrs. Gilpin had corrected her: "My name is not Donovan." Donovan!

He recalled her having told him that she had been married at seventeen, and her subsequent story of having been a trained nurse for three years.

She had also once told him that people had said she married "him" for money, which was not true, and on the occasion of the slip about the nursing she had said he was poor at the time of their marriage.

He had not noticed those discrepancies before, but now he recalled them with cruel distinctness and memory.

All little slips that, singly, might have been explained away, but that now, facing him collectively, in a solid phalanx of evidence, were utterly convincing and damning.

What the truth was the young man could not even guess. It might be anyone of several hideous possibilities that swept through his tortured mind as if taunting him with the easiness with which they become facts.

All he knew was that in some way or other his Mignonette Lady, Teddy's love, and also his own love as well now, was a swindler.

Beautiful and dear as she was to him, and piteous though she seemed in her smallness and quietness, he did

not even attempt to find for her a milder epithet than that odious one — swindler. She had become known to them all under pretences ; she had won the friendships of Brigit, of the Lansings, the Lenskys, and the worldly-wise old Duchess. Pranked in her assumed personality she had won her way close to their hearts, and she was a swindle.

Worse, she had gained Teddy's honest young love, and Teddy must suffer.

As to his own feelings Tommy was as yet too dazed to think much. He had adored her, he had tried to be her friend, he had given her a close place, as Teddy's wife, in his future.

But now with bewildering and cruel enmeshment he knew her to be not the self he had known — she was a stranger, an unknown person, a liar, a swindler. And he loved her.

Of that fact there was no doubt, nor did he attempt to deny it in his own mind, any more than he attempted to mitigate her crimes.

It was, the one thing, just as was the other.

And he was very young, little Kingsmead, and his dream of love had been to him a most holy and beautiful thing, and had meant much to him.

Now, at a blow it was shattered, killed outright before his eyes, for instead of loving the wonderful woman made for him, he loved one, he knew, all unworthy.

Sitting in his room he heard the motor come in and

stop at the door. Then he heard Mrs. Gilpin's voice, saying good-night to Inez. She was content with the evening, she believed that she was still undetected.

And she would no doubt go to bed and dream of Teddy. Tommy groaned aloud.

Poor Teddy! Yes, and poor Nanny! For she loved Teddy. It was all so mixed!

If he had made, he now began to realise, one discovery alone, either of them, it would have been so much easier to bear. If he had suddenly found that he loved Teddy's future wife, how simply he could have gone back to the Castelletto to fight the thing down. It would have been hard, but his course would have been so obvious that it would have needed no reflection. It would have been like a hard white highroad stretching in front of him.

Or had he learned, in that wonderful moment while she sang, only that she was not herself, not the self he knew and had believed in, then, too, things would have been easier. Teddy, of course, must not be allowed to marry a swindler, and it would have been painful to make that clear, but the brutal complications, the paradoxical difficulties, would not so have torn at his mind.

It was one o'clock when, at last, the young man found himself standing by the open window, conscious of the night and the time.

For nearly two hours he had been tramping up and down his room. He was very tired, and he was cold,

for his fire had long since died to a mere wreath of palely gloomy embers. Closing the window he went to the fireplace and looked down at it. There was wood in plenty in the box on his right, but nothing to kindle it with.

Suddenly he saw on his table a letter addressed by him to Teddy, which he had forgotten to have posted.

It was a very pale and grim Tommy who tore the close-written sheets out of their envelope, a Tommy whose face seemed to have suddenly grown older; from which something, not quite youth, but something contained in the essence of youth, had quite gone. If the Duchess had been there she would have told him that he looked at that moment like his paternal grandmother, the Lady Kingsmead who, someone said, had never forgiven her husband for a love-affair that he had had, in a joyous, absent-minded way. The story went that although she lived under his roof without scandal, until his death, fifteen years after the love-affair, she had in all that time never addressed one word to him when they were alone together.

And Tommy, as he reread the letter he had written that very morning to his absent friend, looked like this obstinate and relentless old woman.

“DEAR LANNER: I was awfully sorry not to find you here last night, though I’m sure you did well in going, and I was not the only disappointed one.

"We got back at six, after two pauses, and she was very tired. I wish, dear old chap, that you could have seen her there, at the factory. So little and lovely and delicate-looking, her beautiful white dress quite forgotten, as she helped the doctor dress wounds, the awfulness of which I cannot bear to think of, even now. She was so gentle, so capable and unafraid. I, wretched little nuisance, did my best, but it was a poor best, and at last, when the work was done, I toppled over in a faint, and they got me to the doctor's house before I came to. All right again, now, however. . . .

"I am glad I was there, Teddy. It was a privilege to see her. It is a privilege to know her, and I can't tell you how happy it makes me to think of her marrying you. You are very fortunate, for there surely is no one so good and so dear in the world. . . .

"But here I am orating, and it will bore you. I am writing in bed, and must get up. Come back soon. I miss you. Also — when you *do* come, don't waste any more time. I am sure she cares for you.

"Yours,
"T."

Thus the letter, read slowly with that grim smile of the grandmother he had never seen. He could, it was clear, never forgive her. Just as he never paltered about his love for her, he never paltered about her unforgivableness.

Making long twists of the two sheets of his letter he inserted them delicately under a rough, dry bit of wood that he chose from the box, and set a flaming match to the paper. He watched it gravely while it flickered and finally caught the loose mossy back of the log and settled on it. Then going to a corner he brought back a long

box which he opened and from which he took a violin, unstrung and unused-looking.

There was a bearskin rug in front of the fire, and lying down on it, the violin in one arm, he closed his eyes and tried to rest.

CHAPTER XVII

“MRS. GILPIN expects me.”

Mrs. Gilpin's pretty parlour-maid stepped aside and let him enter, and, when he had taken off his damp coat, led him upstairs. It was two days after the dinner at Pomfret Abbey, but Tommy had not seen Mrs. Gilpin since he walked away from her singing voice that evening.

The following day he had stayed in his room, saying, with truth, that he was not well; and when she went back to Creene after lunch he had sent word by a footman to ask if he might call on her the next afternoon.

The maid, opening the drawing-room door, announced him, and then closing the door on him, left them alone.

It was a desolate, rain-drenched day, but the long white room with its bowls of mignonette and its delicate silken curtains looked very cheery in its slightly prim way. There was a bright fire, — and what would England be without her open fires? — and Mrs. Gilpin herself, all in grey, with her little mirror flashing as she rose to greet him, looked a personification of picturesque domesticity.

“I am glad you have come,” she said.

Tommy looked at her very gravely. He loved her and she was a swindler. She was a swindler and he loved her.

There was something rather awful in the adamantine irreconcilability of these two facts.

"Why," he asked in a quiet voice, "have you lied to us all?"

For a moment she stared at him as if she did not understand. Then a little smile stirred her pink lips.

"I am glad you know," she said, her voice as even as his. The clock struck three as she spoke — a cheerful, silver-toned little clock it was. Tommy turned and looked at it as if it had been an intrusive human being.

"Sit down." Mrs. Gilpin, as she spoke, sat down herself, and took up her work, a long, delicate white seam of some kind. Her cotton had slipped from the eye of her needle when she rose, and the needle lay, a narrow flash of light, on the rug before her.

Tommy leaned down and picked it up, and while with trembling hands she rethreaded it, he drew closer to the fire one of the slim-legged little chairs and sat down.

"How," she began, looking at him, "did you find out?"

"Through — Portrush's story — and something he said later. Then, while you were singing," he went on, telling his tale quite simply, "it — came over me. I remembered the photograph you showed me ——"

"Yes. There was no scar. I was foolish to keep the photograph, but — I loved him."

There was another pause, while she stitched daintily at her transparent frill.

"It — is n't your real name, I suppose?" he asked suddenly.

"No. I never set eyes on Bill Gilpin. But I may as well tell you the whole story now. You are probably imagining all sorts of things that are n't true."

"I am trying not to imagine — anything. And I should like to know the truth. If you — lie to me now," he added, his lip quivering for a second, "I shall know it."

"I will not lie to you now. And believe me, I am really almost glad to tell you the truth. I have minded that part, deceiving you."

"All right. Go on."

He did not know how grave, how inexorable he looked as he sat there in his little chair, but his graveness, his inexorability were very great, and she knew it.

"Then," she began, plunging boldly into the middle of her story, "I never have been married to anyone, and my name is ——"

"Aileen Donovan."

"Ah, you remember. Yes, Aileen Donovan. Poor Jessie West! How well I remember her — and the rest, at Bart's. Well, my father was an Irish vet, and my mother was a lady. Never mind her name. He died when I was about twelve, and we lived until I was seventeen at a little place near Down. Then — she died.

She died very suddenly, and there was no money. The clergyman there, a nice old man, got me some music-pupils — my mother was a musician and had taught me well — and then, for it bored me, the life there, got me in at Bart's. I was there one year, after my probation was over, and I liked it. I like sick people and they like me.

"One day," she was still sewing placidly, "I got into a row with one of the surgeons, and was sent away. So I went back — home — and was stopping there quietly at the inn, which was kept by an old servant of ours, until I could decide what to do.

"And — *he* came. I'll not tell you his name. He was — still is, I dare say — a stock-broker, and rich. But that did n't matter. I loved him, and he loved me. I was a perfectly good girl, and he knew it, and he said he 'd marry me.

"We went to London and — he gave me," she added with great distinctness, "a little flat in Baker Street. He gave me clothes, and jewels, and anything I wanted, but he would not marry me, now that he had got me, and I could n't go away, because I loved him. He was," she added, "very good to me."

She had stopped sewing now, and her hands were clasped on her work.

"Then — well, there 's no use in going into details — he married. But he gave me enough money to have always two thousand pounds a year, and he bought me this house."

"Oh," groaned Tommy, "how could you?"

She looked at him, a little tender, almost pitying smile on her lips. "How could I not? I was hurt to death, and I wanted to be alone, and — not to do the usual thing."

"The usual thing?"

"Yes, go from bad to worse. I did not want to do that. I was ill, too, — oh, quite in the romantic way, — for a long time. Then I found the deeds and so on of the house, which he had not mentioned to me. It was a kind thought."

"Have you seen him since?"

She raised her eyes, her beautiful clear eyes, to his. "Never. We should neither of us wish to. Well — that is all there is to that part of the story."

"Yes. And now," his voice was grim, "tell me how that poor dead man came into it."

She was silent for a moment.

Her calmness, as free from the affectation of amusement or carelessness as from any real nervousness, was, he vaguely realised, amazing.

She sat there in her low chair as serenely, in spite of the little touch of shyness that he had never seen leave her save among the wounded people at Ramsbury, as if his visit had been a most ordinary one; as though she had not been caught in a situation which she must know would forever bar her out from the man she loved.

It was, in its way, very admirable, her undemonstra-

tive courage, and he knew it, her relentless young judge, yet he had no mercy in his heart.

"Yes, that is another story," she began softly. "You see, I was badly hurt. And I wanted solitude. And — I wanted to be good. Well — I had lived then in London, under my own name, only — as — as — Mrs."

At this, for the first time, she faltered, and her white eyelids quivered a little.

"So — when it was finished, and — I was beginning over — I wanted a new name. And I happened to find, while I was — packing — an old newspaper with the story in it. The story of Captain Gilpin, as Major Portrush told it the other night. The article told that he was — quite alone in the world, so far as people knew, and that his wife died at Udaipur several days after the battle. She, too, came, the newspaper said, from no one knew where. They seemed to be as lonely, as — as *unbelonging* as I myself. Even her death was not announced as a positive fact. They seemed like dream people. He had joined the regiment only a short time before, and no other Gilpins claimed him, so that even his watch was kept by Major Portrush. It seemed," she went on quietly, "a lonely story — as if they might, being so lonely themselves, have forgiven me. And so — it was n't a prominent story — I looked it up in the papers and it was only very briefly mentioned — I decided to — to be his widow.

"And I have been his widow. I have lived here quite quietly ever since. I am, you see, a home body by nature, so it has been very easy."

This, Tommy knew, was all true.

Gullible as he had been before, his wits were now sharpened to an almost uncanny acuteness, and he knew that she had not lied in the slightest particular. She was, as she said, he felt, looking at her sitting by her hearth-fire, essentially a home body.

The pity of it!

Rising, he went to the nearest window and stood looking out into the grey, rainy afternoon. As he stood there the clock struck four.

"That's all," she said presently.

"Yes. I am convinced of that."

She rose and coming close to him looked into his eyes with her serene yet half-shy gaze.

"You will not betray me?" she asked.

CHAPTER XVIII

“BETRAY you? Of course I won’t. You need n’t fear that,” he returned, not even attempting to conceal in his voice the contempt that surged up in him at the question.

But her eyes were still dark with anxiety. “I did n’t think you ’d — put it into the papers,” she went on, her hands lightly clasped in front of her. “I mean — you will not tell — Teddy.”

He stepped back and looked at her from a little distance, as if she, as well as his mind, needed focussing.

“That,” he said, “I leave to you.”

For the first time her high courage faltered, and one of her hands went quickly to her throat as though she could not breathe.

“To me!”

“Yes.”

“But, Lord Kingsmead, there is no necessity for his knowing. What good could it do?” she asked, coming toward him, sincere wonder in her face. “It would only hurt him.”

Tommy’s stare was as sincere as her own, for he recognised the utter lack of comprehension of his view-point

and saw that he must explain. They were speaking in different moral tongues.

"Listen, Mrs. Gilpin," he began with a new gentleness, as of a patient missionary explaining the story of the Cross to a savage, "you don't understand. Won't you sit down, please, and I will try to make you."

Obediently she sank into the chair she had vacated, and sat looking inquiringly at him.

"You surely," he began unsparingly, but still with the gentle look in his eyes, "cannot expect to marry Teddy *now*?"

"Yes. Why not? No one but you knows. No one need ever know."

"Why not, you ask? But — don't you realise that you have done a terrible thing in deceiving us all — in winning his love under false pretences?"

She flushed with a little proud movement of her head.

"'Winning' implies an effort, Lord Kingsmead. I made no effort to make him love me. For a long time I did n't even see that he did."

"That may be. But don't you see that he loves — Mrs. Gilpin — a — a widow with —" it was bitterly hard work, and he stumbled over the ungracious words, but went on doggedly — "with an honest record? He did not even know — Aileen Donovan."

She winced, but he could see with his painful pre-science that it was at his voice more than at the meaning of his words.

"He never *will* know Aileen Donovan," she said. "I have n't a relative in the world, and no one will ever question his wife."

Tommy crossed his legs impatiently.

"Oh, this is awful!" he burst out. "It would be ridiculous if it were not terrible. You can't marry him, that's all. If you can't make up your mind to tell him the truth, you must just go away — disappear."

"But I can't. Where could I go? This is my home. I love it. And besides," she added gently, with a little coaxing smile, "I am not bad. I will not hurt him. I have never hurt anyone in my life."

Through Tommy's whirling brain came a bar or two of beautiful music — the phrase in "*Tosca*" where the suffering woman says

"Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore,
Non fici male ad anima viva" —

that she lived in her art, in her love, and never had hurt a living soul. It is a pathetic bit of melody, tender and haunting, and as the distressing interview went on it seemed to echo and re-echo in the quiet room as if a heart-broken voice were singing it in the distance.

"I believe that you have not hurt people, that you are kind," he answered, using the phrase she had more than once applied to him, "but all that does not help. You must see — I must make you see that you cannot marry Teddy."

"That," she answered with a ghost of her wistful smile, "is what no one can make me see."

Tommy was for the moment at a loss. Had she met him with irony, with tears, with indifference, he would, he thought, have been able to cope with her; but this attitude of gentle misunderstanding puzzled him utterly. It was half-past four.

In the silence Mrs. Gilpin put out her hand and touched the bell by the fireplace.

"Tea, please, Carson," she said pleasantly to the parlour-maid, and then, as the door closed, she added to Tommy, "Tea will help us think, it clears the brain."

But whatever tea might do to the brain, his head for the moment seemed a whirling confusion of infant thoughts struggling for growth into comprehensive manhood.

Rising he went into the little conservatory and stood, his hands in his jacket pockets, before the fuchsia, whose graceful little bells, stirred by the gusts of rain blown against the glass walls by the rising wind, seemed to be playing a little mocking carillon to him. "Ah," he thought, with a consciousness of his disabling youth very unusual, "if I were only older!"

When the tea was brought in he took quite mechanically the carefully prepared cup she gave him, and balanced on his thin knee a tiny flowered plate of bread and butter.

"Try to eat," she said kindly, her eyes almost maternal in their gentle anxiety; "you look tired out."

He shook his head. "I am not tired. I am — troubled. I hate to hurt you, yet there are things that must be said ——"

"Say them, Lord Kingsmead, say them. Only if you think me a bad woman, you are wrong. I am not bad. I — I loved him. Not as I love now," she added, as if touched by a leaping flame of feeling, "ah no! But — I was very young, and lonely, and he loved me, and was good to me. I was good to him, too."

She sipped her tea as she spoke, her small face still flushed by the touch of the flame, the delicate shell-like flush that was to him so marvellously beautiful, but her hand was quite steady, her brow as smooth as a child's.

"You see I met many men while I was with him. He used to bring them to dine. And — they, like you, did n't understand. I know that more than one of them — cared for me. Yet because I cared for him so much, not one of them ever dared to try to show me, even without words — my loyalty was such that it made them loyal, and they all treated me just as if I had been his wife.

"Later, too, when he began to tire of me (it was not his fault, it was because I am so — quiet and stay-at-home), I was good to him. I never let him see how it hurt. He never knew, even at the last. He had been

good to me, and it would have been unfair to make scenes —— ”

Tommy set down his cup with a little crash.

“Damn the fellow!” he cried fiercely. “He should have *married* you.”

She smiled at him, her eyes bright with gratification.

“Yes, he should have. He was not very good, perhaps, but he was good to me in everything but that. So when he left me I just said good-bye to him and let him go.”

It was a strange little story, strangely told, and it took a sharp effort on Tommy’s part to turn his mental back to that aspect of the case and again face the immediate future.

“I am deeply sorry for you,” he said slowly, “please believe that. Please believe, too, that the whole thing — hurts me horribly. But — I must also make you see that — Teddy must not marry you.”

“No.”

Her delicate pink mouth set firmly as she spoke, and she rose. “I am, in spite of everything, a good woman, and I can make him happy and *do him good* as no one else could. You know that as well as I.”

Her words were very arresting, for in his mind he was forced to acknowledge that she would do Teddy good. Teddy was a rather vacillating nature, he was lazy, he needed a goad, an impetus. And Nancy Gilpin, as she remained to Tommy, would be those things, and bring out all the good that lay in him.

Ah, if only she had been Nancy Gilpin, the brave Bill Gilpin's widow, how comparatively easy it would have been for Tommy to see her his friend's wife!

As it was, he knew, with the deep, unwavering conviction of what was right and what was wrong that had been born in him, that he could not allow the marriage.

It was a horrid gibe of fate, that of forcing him of all people into the position of judge in the matter, but here he was, and he must do his best.

"You cannot marry Teddy," he said abruptly, springing to his feet. "You are, God help you, not a fitting wife for him."

"Then," she answered, "you *do* think me bad."

He was silent for a moment, but she saw that his eyes were swimming with tears.

"I am just what you have seen," she pleaded, standing close to him but still keeping all her curious remoteness that had seemed to him so beautiful. "I am — the quiet little woman living alone, seeing few people, never talked about — doing no harm — respecting herself and others ——"

But his racked nerves could bear no more.

"I know all that," he cried roughly, the tears now rolling down his cheeks, "but you were a man's paid mistress and you are still living on his money. Now do you understand?"

Her face ash-white, her lips parted with a look almost one of stupidity, she stared at him.

"Oh!" she said.

"Yes! I — I hate myself for hurting you. Take your choice about — about telling him, or — going away. If you go away I give you my word of honour I'll never tell him. And you see — I trust you not to — to fool me again — which will you do?"

There was a long pause, and then she said, twisting the chain of her little hand-glass so tightly round her hands that they were red and swollen, "I will do neither. You are good and kind, and I — I like you, Lord Kingsmead, but you are only a boy. I am older than you, and I know that — I shall be able to do him good. I will marry him."

She spoke quite firmly, and he saw that the twisting of her hands meant determination, not nervousness.

"You mean that?" he asked, suddenly very stern though his white cheeks were still wet.

"I do."

"Then — good-bye. I am going back to Kingsmead to tell him myself."

"Surely," she protested, "you will not do that. It would be — betraying me."

"If I did n't I should be betraying him."

"But ——"

"There are n't any 'buts,' Mrs. Gilpin. Oh," he burst out, "can't you see? You have n't even a name!"

Even then she was not angry. Instead of anger or fear there was in her eyes the strange look of wonder.

He puzzled her, quite evidently, as much if not more than she puzzled him.

"Listen," he said gently, "I — it makes me very miserable, but won't you try to see? I'm not a prig, but ——"

She smiled faintly and laid her hand on his arm. "No, you are not a prig. How — how *young* of you to think of that! But you are — just that. So young! You don't understand. You see, I am just what you thought me. I am *me* — and he loves me, and I shall help him. Can't you see that?"

Tommy groaned. "But you are *not* what he thought. That is just what is so awful. I know he loves you, God help him, and I know that you love him. And that is why you must tell him."

"I will not tell him."

The corners of her mouth set hard, but her eyebrows did not stir, and she continued to look at him with the strange tranquillity so characteristic of her.

"You refuse?"

"I do," she answered.

"Then," Tommy declared, drawing a deep breath that seemed to move his heart several inches, "I will. Good-bye."

Without a protest from her, or an instant's hesitation on his part, he left the room and the house.

CHAPTER XIX

It must be remembered that Tommy Kingsmead at this crisis was only three-and-twenty; it must be remembered that he had just awakened to the fact that he loved Nancy Gilpin; it must be remembered that he was a reverent, passionately idealistic youth, and that at the very moment of his realisation of his love for the gentle woman he had worshipped ever since he knew her, had come the realisation that she was unworthy of his love.

He was, as he left the house, quite forgetting the motor in which he had come, the chauffeur of which was at that moment being pampered with port and cakes in the kitchen, in a mental turmoil that, luckily, few young men can even conceive of.

Tramping doggedly along through the wet evening, over mile after mile of muddy, slippery road, his wheeling thoughts, so tumultuous at first, gradually quieted down to a dead-level of patiently accepted misery.

That he must, added to all his other suffering, add the horror of telling the dreadful story to Teddy, had seemed at first almost unbearable; but Tommy, despite his delicate little body, was possessed of a proud cour-

age that could accept without even mental murmur the things sent to him.

So, while he tramped along, his coat-collar turned up, his cold hands buried deep in his pockets, his thoughts were not for himself, but for his friend.

He, Tommy, at least knew all already; for him no hideous surprise lay in ambush ready to spring on him and tear at his breast with cruel claws.

Whereas Teddy — Teddy, then at Ramsbury, surrounded by sordid tragedies that he could not help — was, no doubt, hugging at that very moment close to his soul the thought, the memory of the woman he loved.

This, somehow, made Tommy's agony the more acute, and the prospect of the inactive night before him the more awful. The next day he would go to Ramsbury. Not, thank God, by motor; not over the roads by which he had passed with Nanny while his adoration was still green. He would take an early train, and, on arriving, go straight to his friend and tell him the truth.

Only one pang was, in that long evening walk, spared Tommy. He at least was not torn by any mistaken sense of loyalty to the woman he loved. He loved her, yes, and he suffered for and with her, but quite clearly he saw his way unblinded by prejudice or pity. The gods, in trying him so hard, had at least held their hands from doing to him the horror of uncertainty regarding right and wrong. He knew, quite certainly, that no matter how sorry he himself was for the poor

woman, she was not one whom Teddy could marry. The rain ceased when he was about half-way home, and as night crept up the sky from the dark sodden earth, a few stars came out.

On Tommy hurried, his clothes splashed with mud, his face still wet with rain.

“Poor Teddy, oh, poor Teddy!” he thought.

Later, he vaguely felt, he would think “poor Tommy,” but the piteousness of Teddy’s present confident happiness filled him with a kind of horror that deadened all other feeling.

Half-way up the dark avenue a motor passed him from behind, and he stood still. It was Teddy, he knew, although it had been too dark for him to see. Teddy had returned, winged, no doubt by his longing to see his love ——

Tommy’s steps flagged and his tired mind faltered. He must, then, tell his sorry tale to-night.

Realising suddenly his own great fatigue, he longed for one night’s respite — for a long bodily rest in his bed. He was so unutterably weary now that he felt he *could* not talk.

Very slowly he crept on toward the house, and when he reached the door and the butler confirmed his knowledge that Teddy had been in the motor (if knowledge can be confirmed) he went at once to his room and sank down in his rain-soaked clothes in a chair by the fire.

Five minutes later and he was sound asleep, his wet

boots smoking in the heat, his chin dropped in utter exhaustion. And it was thus that Teddy, an hour later, having by chance heard of his arrival, found him.

When Tommy woke, gradually, pleasantly, to find his dear friend smiling down at him with a look of deepest content, he for a moment forgot the horror of things actual, and smiled back at the beautiful young man his sweetest, crookedest smile of affection.

"Poor old Tommy, you look tired to death," observed Teddy, "and your clothes are soaked, silly young ass."

And then Tommy, looking down at himself, remembered. He was stiff and aching all over, but he rose at a bound and stood with his back to the dying fire.

"Don't b-bother about me," he said; "I—I was walking. Where are your father and mother?"

Teddy gave a half shamefaced, chuckling laugh.

"Still — there. It was an awful business, Tommy. And father takes it to heart even more than he need. He and mother will stay for the funerals — the day after to-morrow. I," he added, suddenly grave, "could n't wait. Tommy, have you — seen her?"

"Yes. I have seen her."

"Well?"

All the delicious impatience of the lover rang in his voice as he said the word, and Tommy shivered.

"Well? You don't think she — *won't*?"

Tommy at that made a mighty effort.

"Look here, Teddy," he said slowly, "there is something I must tell you — something very bad. I — it h-hurts me — but I must."

Teddy laid his hand on his shoulder and eyed him sternly. "It's not," he asked with a quaver in his voice, "that — that *you* have been — making love to her?"

Even in his pain Tommy was conscious of the old pang of pitying disgust that slips of the kind in Teddy occasioned him.

"Don't you know me better than that?" he asked impatiently.

Teddy flushed. "I beg your pardon. Go on."

"It's — it's this. She — you can't marry her, Teddy. Her name is n't even Gilpin. She — has fooled us all."

Teddy stared at him for a moment, and then burst out laughing. "You're dreaming, old chap! Of course her name's Gilpin. What should it be?"

"It's Donovan," returned Tommy wearily, feeling as if he had already told the story so often that his tongue refused its duty. "Aileen Donovan. She never was in India. She never saw Gilpin. Her father was an Irish vet, and — she has never been married."

It was said, and in his relief he sat down.

"Do you mean to say that she is — just a fraud, an adventuress? Why, you're mad, man!"

Teddy laughed at the absurdity of the tale.

Tommy looked at him. "‘Adventuress’ does n’t seem to be exactly the word," he protested mildly, "but — it’s true, what I said. Her name is Aileen Donovan."

The pretty red faded from Teddy’s brown cheek, but he refused to be convinced.

"It’s laughable. Some jealous woman has been lying about her. How can you be such an ass as to believe such a story?"

"I’m not an ass. She told me herself."

Then at last young Lansing became alarmed, and in a sharp, high voice new to his friend claimed circumstantial detail. And Tommy told it much as it had been told to him, without embellishment, without any attempt at palliation.

"You see," he added when he had finished, "I tried to make her understand that she must tell you. And I failed. Therefore I had to tell you m-myself."

"She has never been married?" repeated Teddy with a puzzled frown.

"No."

"Then — she is n’t a widow at all."

"No."

"Well?"

Tommy looked at him. "Dear old Teddy! Poor dear old chap!"

Lansing stared stupidly at the fire for several seconds. Then he rose.

“Well — I’m going to marry her just the same,” he declared.

And Tommy saw that his eyes were very bloodshot.

“You are tired, Teddy; come along to bed, and we’ll talk it over to-morrow,” he answered gently.

Teddy looked at him. “You may go to the devil,” he answered in a quiet voice. “I don’t care what becomes of you. I’m going over to — to *her* at once and make her marry me.”

And poor Tommy, wise for all his youth, let him go without another word, for it was not the time for words.

CHAPTER XX

OBEDIENT to the clamorous call of the great gong, Tommy hurried into evening clothes and went down to dinner. He would in his present mood rather have faced a dragon than Inez Lansing, but he was in a measure her guest and his undefined code did not permit of his causing inconvenience by staying upstairs. To his relief, Inez, who wore an almost ingeniously unbecoming blue frock, was distrait and silent herself.

When dinner was announced she explained shortly that Teddy had gone out, and then, in silence, they went into the dining-room. The small table looked small indeed in the great room, and poor Tommy glanced appalled at the long menu that stood in a silver frame before him.

Must he eat, or pretend to eat, or even watch Inez pretend to eat, all these things?

"I'm not a bit hungry, are you?" she asked suddenly, as if she had read his thoughts.

"No, not at all. What have you been doing all day?"

She gave a little laugh.

"I? Nothing at all. Oh, Hubert Green called, and we went for a walk."

"Nice chap, Green."

She laughed again. "Do you like him? He has very bad manners, I always think."

Tommy took some beef and looked at it with actual physical loathing.

"Bad manners? No, I never thought so. In what way do you mean?"

It was a hideous effort to talk, but he felt that he must do his best to entertain his hostess, and silence in itself was at present of no comfort to him.

"I mean to say — he is very outspoken."

"Oh yes, he is that," returned Tommy, forgetting Green entirely and thinking of Teddy; "but — one must n't be too hard on him. It is not very easy for him."

She stared. Then she flushed.

"What do you mean? You can't have seen ——"

Tommy drank some water.

"I'm afraid I'm being very stupid, Miss Lansing. But as to Green, I can only say I've never seen him guilty of bad manners."

"He was very rude about Captain Axendale-Murray."

"Oh, rude about Axendale-Murray, was he? Perhaps he — perhaps he did n't like him ——"

As he floundered on, sitting very erect in his chair, old Lady Kingsmead opposite him in her black-and-gold frame seemed to be fixing her cold, unyielding eye on him. It was an awful meal.

"As if it was any business of *his* how many times I danced with Captain Axendale-Murray."

"Of course it was n't," assented Tommy dreamily, his thoughts again with Teddy; "why on earth should he care?"

Inez stared and then was silent, her face looking unpleasantly sulky, although Tommy did not notice it. He was in a curious mental condition.

As yet no feeling of jealousy had come to confuse him, and his one thought, presenting itself in a thousand different aspects, was how he was to convince Teddy that he could not marry Mrs. Gilpin.

He, Tommy, saw it so clearly that it baffled him utterly to realise Teddy's blindness on the point. At that very moment, he knew, Teddy and Nanny were together. Nanny! Nanny Gilpin! An absurdly bourgeois name, unromantic and amazingly unlike one assumed.

But it suited her in her homely prettiness. And the very heart and soul of the tragedy was that she could see no tragedy at all.

She could not see why she must not marry Teddy, and Teddy would not see why he must not marry her. Only Tommy knew, and he, it appeared, was such an idiot that he could not communicate his knowledge to them. That, of course, was awkward, but he was very tired, and might be better able to explain to-morrow. No, he did n't want a sweet, and he could in his exces-

sive nervousness have screamed when the footman offered him one. Why could n't they let him alone?

"You don't look well, Lord Kingsmead," exclaimed Inez as he very gently refused the sweet and leaned back in his chair; "shall we go, if you are not hungry?"

"Yes, yes, let's go."

Tommy felt that any other room in the world would be better than that one, but the drawing-room was as bad, and Inez walking restlessly about nearly drove him mad. He sat by the fire trying hard to make conversation for nearly an hour, and then, suddenly, relief came.

"I am dead tired," she said; "do you mind if I go upstairs?"

And he was alone. Alone, poor Tommy, to sit on the floor by the fire and try to piece together in his mind a speech sufficiently logical to convince Teddy that he must give up Nanny. He would explain to Teddy. In the morning, when he was less tired, he would explain. He would say, "Teddy, dear old fellow, you know how awfully fond I am of you."

No, he would be simply just; he would say, "I am sorry, my heart aches for you both, but she is not, poor thing, the kind of woman one marries."

And then if Teddy was angry, and told him to mind his own business?

Poor little Tommy, he felt so keenly that it was his own business! Teddy's affairs had always been his;

he loved Teddy so much that nothing could be more personal to him than things that were Teddy's. And because he could see where Teddy could only feel, he was unto himself so fully justified that not even the fear of his friend's anger could make him hesitate.

The marriage would be hurtful to Teddy, therefore it must not take place.

As the slow hours passed, this fact remained uppermost in his mind, unobscured, such was his unconscious unselfishness, by any lesser thought. And then, toward midnight, he fell asleep and was awakened as he had been that afternoon, to find Teddy standing before him.

"Oh!"

"Why don't you go to bed?" returned Teddy in a queer voice.

"I — I have been thinking."

Young Lansing sat down and put a log on the dying fire.

"She has told me," he said slowly.

"Yes." Tommy had known that she would not deny; that she would be with poor Teddy as frank as she had been with him.

"It's — a hard-luck story, Tommy."

"Yes."

Teddy was leaning forward staring into the fire, which now crackled merrily as if it were laughing at his griefs. But this thought was Tommy's.

"She — O my God, Tommy, she — cried!"

Tommy did not speak; he could not. Somehow he had not imagined that Nanny would cry, and it was almost too much for him to bear.

"I — I did n't think she'd cry," he faltered.

"Well, she did."

There was a long pause, and then Lansing went on, still looking into the fire: "I'm going to marry her, Kingsmead."

Tommy drew a deep breath. "Her crying, poor soul, does n't change things, Teddy."

"It is n't that. But I love her, and — I want her to be happy. She is very good too. I mean to say," he continued, blushing over the necessity of explaining the word, "very true. She says she will marry me, but — she must have cared an awful lot for that beast, Tommy — she told me quite frankly that she — that she only *likes* me."

Tommy stared, his haggard little face ash-white.

"Only *likes* you?"

"Yes. I suppose there are some women like that, who can love only once. And — I can't tell you how I respect her for telling me."

It seemed to Tommy at that moment as though something were really physically breaking in his breast.

"I — don't understand, Teddy," he said faintly.

Teddy did not notice his emotion.

"Well, I've told you. You're all wrong — or you *were* all wrong about our marrying, and you don't

understand her at all, but — I know you meant to do the fair thing by me, and it must have been a damnable thing to have to do — so I'm telling you now. After to-night," he added with a new dignity, "we'll never mention it again. I will *make* her love me — I say, what's wrong?"

He broke off, for Tommy had leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes helplessly.

"Nothing. I'm — tired. I'll talk to you to-morrow, Teddy. I'm tired ——"

Twenty minutes later Tommy lay in his bed fast asleep. He was worn out, mercifully, and too tired to grapple with the new problem suggested to him by Teddy's confidence.

CHAPTER XXI

THE next morning, brightened by a pleasant, pale sun, was so much warmer than its immediate predecessors that it seemed to Tommy, as he made his way to Creene, almost impossible that it could have been only yesterday that he had rushed homeward over the frozen road.

It was a mild, warm, muddy morning with a warm gleam in the sky and boughs dripping that the day before had been frozen hard and black. Tommy walked rapidly, for he had great need of seeing Mrs. Gilpin.

When he reached Creene and was about to ring the bell, he saw that a little green door in the garden wall was open, and yielding to a feeling that was more instinct than curiosity, he went on and pushing open the door looked down into the sun-filled enclosure.

It was a small garden, evidently devoted to flowers, for the ground was neatly divided into manure-covered beds, while down two sides a row of straw-swathed standard roses stood like wounded warriors keeping stiff guard over the rain-drenched box borders.

At first, as he stood in the gateway, Tommy thought the place was deserted, but hearing a slight sound to his right he turned and saw, bending over a narrow bed

of tender green leaves, Mrs. Gilpin, as yet unconscious of his presence.

Her grey skirt well held up about her ankles, her narrow feet in ugly rubber shoes, she was examining with great interest something that Tommy could, at first, not see.

Then she moved a little, and he beheld at her feet, pale and spectre-like in the winter sun, a snowdrop. He caught his breath. She herself in her simple gown with something white at the throat, something in the droop of her delicate head, the poise of her little body, was like the flower at her feet; and the horrible incongruity of his finding her, come on the errand on which he had come, standing daintily poised in the wet garden watching the poor little overbold thing as it opened its foolish heart to the false sun, struck him like a physical pang.

Suddenly she turned and saw him.

"Ah," she said, "come and look at this snowdrop! This is the kitchen wall, so they are always early here, but this is *very* early."

She was, he saw, very pale, and for the first time in his knowledge of her her eyes were dark-rimmed and heavy, which somehow made her still more like the little rain-drenched flower.

"It — is very pretty," he said, without moving. "May I talk to you?"

"Oh yes — if you must." She drew a deep sigh. "Shall we go in? If you don't mind I'd rather stay in the air."

"Let us stay here, by all means, Mrs. Gilpin — I *can't* say the other name — Teddy told you."

"Yes. He was here last night — for hours. He was angry with you until I told him that it was — absurd of him. I was sorry for him. He is very young."

"Yes," agreed Tommy, innocent at the moment of his own youth, "*very*. I am going away to-day. But first I had to see you. I had a note from him this morning. He says in it he is going to marry you as soon as he can persuade you to marry him."

"Yes, I know." Her voice had a little break in it, and Tommy glanced at her sharply.

"And — you mean to?" he asked.

"He — cares for me," she faltered; "and he is the only person in the whole world who does. I — I am very lonely." It was ineffably sad to him, the unexpected little plaint, and his heart sank, as they paced the wet gravel from end to end of the garden, she still holding her skirts carefully out of the wet, Tommy holding his hat in his hand.

"Then — you persist in marrying him?"

She stood still, looking at him steadily with her weary eyes, that for all their weariness had lost none of their marvellous blue clearness.

"You really think it would injure him?" she asked.

Tommy bowed his head. "Yes. And — you have no right to do it."

"I want to marry him, Lord Kingsmead."

She stood with her hands clasped, looking at the ground.

"Why do you want to marry him? You don't love him."

She started. "Oh, he should not have told you that! How could he?"

"He did. We are friends. And — *I* know that there is someone whom you do love."

"Yes."

"Then?"

She looked up, more really beautiful in her anguish than he had ever seen her.

"That other person does not love me," she returned simply. "If he did — I would not marry Teddy."

Tommy set his teeth. He knew. He had known ever since Teddy told him the night before that Nanny did not love him.

"That person," went on Nanny, "despises me."

"That person," interrupted Tommy grimly, "has nothing whatever to do with it. Never had, and never will. We are thinking of — Teddy. You must not marry him."

Her mouth trembled and she turned away, a sad little grey figure in the gay sunlight.

"I know," she answered humbly. "And so I must marry Teddy. I — I wish — why do you think I should hurt him?"

Tommy was silent.

"I have been quite honest with him," she added pleadingly; "d-do you *really* think it would hurt him?"

And Tommy knew that she did not mean to be cruel.

"I do. Because — because as things now are, he would change toward you. I don't quite know how to put it, but — people who marry ——" he broke off, and she finished his sentence for him.

"People who marry must, you mean, respect as well as love? And you think that I am beyond respect."

It was very painful. Tommy eyed the swaying snow-drop, which they were again approaching, and felt as if he were forced by some cruel law to grind it into the earth with his heel.

"You hurt me," he faltered.

"Yes? Well, you hurt me. If you were older," she went on, still quite unresentfully, "you would not be so hard. You would understand that it is a woman's nature that counts, her soul, rather than what circumstances have made her do."

"Yes. But — the — the right nature could not have been forced into — all that. The first part I admit. You were young, and you loved him — that is an excuse. But there is no excuse for your living on his money all this time."

"I have told you why I did. I wanted to be good."

Tommy groaned, and she repeated her words: "Yes, it is true, I wanted to be good. To get away from — those others, who, even at once, while I was ill, kept call-

ing and writing. His money made — all this — this quiet life and this — respectability, possible.”

“You might have worked.”

The four syllables rang out sharply like a gunshot. That was the weak point in the strange armour of gentleness, and he had aimed at it.

They had again reached the snowdrop, and she stopped, almost as if the shot had indeed hit her.

“Work? But how?”

She looked at him, as she had done yesterday, with honest inquiry in her face. It was very defeating.

“There was nothing I could do well, and things have to be done well nowadays. I was very delicate for a long time after my illness — I needed southern air, and wine and — and things —”

But Tommy, strong in his young inexorableness, refused to let his quivering nerves influence him.

“If it had been I,” he declared, “I should not have considered what I could do — or what I needed. It would have been better to die than to take his money.”

The horror of her inability to understand, of the overmastering love of comfort underlying her misleading but perfectly sincere simplicity, was strong on him, but he refused to let it soften his words.

Grimly he looked down at the snowdrop, his face white and haggard in the strengthening sunlight.

At length she spoke.

"Do you wish," she asked him quietly, "that I had died?"

"God knows I do!" he burst out in anguish. Then he turned and walked away, frightened.

For several minutes she did not move, and then she came slowly to where he stood.

"I understand now," she said, laying her hand on his arm. "At last I understand."

And in the midst of the whirlwind of conflicting feelings that caught him up at her touch, he thought, with a ghost of his familiar smile, that if she did it was more than he did.

For the one thing that was clear to him was his conviction that no matter at what price, and he was already paying himself, his friend was to be prevented from marrying the woman whose comprehension was so strangely limited.

That was it, she really did not know. And, Tommy felt, people have no right to not know certain things. Her lack of moral comprehension was as awful as would have been the lack of a child born not only without sight but without eyes.

He turned to her.

"No, you do not understand," he said gently; "that is what is so — so hopeless."

"But I do."

She had drawn away from him, and in the sun her little mirror glittered so that he covered his eyes for a moment with his hand.

"Veronica," he said suddenly. "You remember the story you told us — the blind woman in Venice?"

"Yes."

"Well — d-don't you see," he stammered in his eagerness, "you said — you *yourself* said that he could n't marry her because she was blind and *could not look after his house*. Now, don't you see? Ah, Nanny Gilpin, can't you see that that's why? Teddy must n't marry you. Look!" Holding up the little glass he mirrored her face in it. "Look at yourself. Your eyes are not blind. Look — at your poor blind self. That is why. You are blind, my dear, my dear — and you could n't look after his house!"

There was a long pause, during which she looked steadily at her face in the glass he held in his shaking hand.

Then she closed her eyes and took the glass from him. "Yes, now — at last — I understand," she said quietly. "I told you before that I understood, but I did n't. I thought you meant — worldlier things. Now I do understand."

Miserably they stood in the sun, both of them hopelessly looking down at the hopeful earth.

"And — I give you my word that I will not marry Teddy."

Taking her hand he bent his smooth sandy head over it.

"Thank you."

For a moment she looked into his eyes, and then, going swiftly from him, she stooped and picked the snowdrop.

“Keep this,” she said.

Before he could answer he was alone.

CHAPTER XXII

THE relief derived from the promise and his unquestioning faith in it carried Tommy back to Kingsmead as if wings had grown at his heels. Teddy was safe; no more talking would be necessary, and Tommy felt as if the obligation to talk was one of the most painful in the world. He could go away, quite quietly, and — events would shape themselves.

Teddy, most probably, would write to him and revile him when he found that after all Nanny had been influenced by Tommy. But Tommy would not answer the letters, and with time Teddy would — not forgive him, for he needed no forgiveness, but — understand.

And Nanny — since the giving of her promise the necessity for calling her by her unreal real name had died, leaving her a fixture in his mind as Nanny — would, he felt sure, although he had left her with not a word when she had given him the snowdrop, do nothing to fan Teddy's resentment. It was even, he realised, quite probable that she would refuse to marry him, without explanations of any kind, or any further mention of Tommy's name.

There was in her no malice, no unkindness, not even any of the spasmodic cruelty that makes so many very kind women hard to deal with.

He, by great good luck, had, it seemed, succeeded in convincing her that she must not marry Teddy; that by marrying him she would injure him. Therefore she would not do it.

Deeply relieved, he went upstairs at the end of his long walk, and to his room.

Teddy's man was, as he entered, just putting the last touches to his packing.

"Mr. Teddy is out, my lord," Park said, looking up from his work with a rather sharp glance. "He left a note for your lordship."

The note said merely that Teddy was off to Creene after a necessary visit to one of his father's tenants, and that he hoped Tommy would never again mention the matter they had discussed the night before.

Tommy winced as he read, for it was very obvious that poor Teddy had started off with a high heart.

However, he, Tommy, could, he saw, just catch the noon express, so he hastened downstairs to say good-bye to Inez.

"I will write to Mrs. Lansing," he said to the girl, whom he found walking aimlessly about the drawing-room; "you have all been very kind to me."

"You have been kind to us, Lord Kingsmead. I ought to tell you that Madame de Lensky has asked me to visit her, and that the Duchess is coming back here in the spring. So you see our days of social obscurity are, thanks to you, practically over."

"I am glad," he returned simply. Then he added, looking at her closely: "I hope nothing has happened?"

She was, he saw, depressed and nervous, and in her present mood he came nearer to liking her than he had ever done.

"Happened? No, of course not. I have a headache, that's all."

He made no reply to this long since canonised lie, and a few minutes later was tearing down the avenue in a motor.

How many things had happened since he had arrived at Kingsmead only five weeks before! How many times he had, since his first sacrifice on the day of the drive to Pinchbroke, been in motors! He had now almost got over — no, almost forgotten his dislike of the things. They had dwindled to no importance in his mind.

But Teddy's love-affair! Alas, he had fostered that! He had loved and tended it as if it had been a flower, and now it had changed to a poisonous weed.

He, Tommy, had meant well, but he had bungled. Even his great Christmas party had ended in tragedy, though that was of course not his fault.

"I am a meddler," the young man told himself as the motor drew up to the station, "I ought to mind my own business. When I am older I'll look back on this all as — the result of the indiscreet exuberance of three-and-twenty."

He smiled at the thought, for, however mistaken he

had been, he had done his best, and Teddy at least was saved.

He bought his ticket, and, being early, walked up and down until the train came in.

Just as it left, he comfortably installed in an otherwise empty first-class carriage, the door was torn open with the irritating bustle of guards, and young Green jumped in.

"I thought I was late, by Jove!" the newcomer exclaimed. "How do you do?"

Tommy replied that he was all right and unfolded a newspaper. He did not want to talk, he wanted to rest.

He was going back, as fast as boats and trains could carry him, to the place of rest, the Castelletto, and he wished not to think more than was necessary of the people he had left behind. But young Green was restless and insisted on talking, and suddenly, before Tommy saw what he was about to do, had blurted out, "What brutes women are!"

"Women? Why?"

"Because," young Green bit his cigarette in two and threw it away, "they are all snobs and — and cheats. Upon my word, I — I hate 'em!"

Poor Tommy, confronted thus with another exposition of the eternal problem, moved restlessly. He too would have liked to forget the ungentle sex for a time if he could.

"What 's wrong, Green?" he asked kindly. "Any one been ill-treating you?"

"Oh no — it 's — a chap I know, rather a pal of mine. It makes me sick, Kingsmead. The girl led him on — made him think — you know — all last season, and then gets a bee in her bonnet and — carries on so under his very nose that — that he sees she never cared a curse for him any of the time. I 've — I 've had a beastly time with him."

"What did he do?" asked Tommy wearily.

"Nothing. Went away — they 're Cumberland people. She — the girl is engaged to a chap she thinks '*smart*,' I suppose — they are all alike, girls — it 's *too* disgusting." The young man subsided into silence, and Tommy suddenly realised that he was very hungry.

"I 'm sorry, Green," Tommy repeated, wishing he had eaten more breakfast. "It does seem hard luck, but perhaps he 'll get over it."

Green gave a short laugh. "Of course I 'm boring you," he said ruefully. "I know I am. You 've probably never cared about a girl, and until you do you can't understand. It 's — I tell you, Kingsmead, it 's — just plain hell."

He was, this casually-met young man, as powerful a magician as ever a wise man of old, for in a trice, called up by his simple words, the wall built by his relief over Teddy's escape between his mind and his heart crumbled

away, and Tommy was face to face with his own personal misery.

Did he not know? He, with his poor little snowdrop crushed in a bit of paper against his heart?

“There must be a restaurant car in this train, is n’t there?” he asked with an effort. “I had a very early breakfast and am hungry.”

Young Green shrugged his shoulders. “Yes, oh yes, there’s a restaurant car. I’ll not go in, I’m not hungry,” he added, a note of rather ridiculous reproach in his voice.

So Tommy went and ate cold beef and potatoes and drank a bottle of ale, and watched with his outward eye the flying sunny landscape, but his inward eye saw with terrible distinctness the small white face under its wings of smooth dark hair that he knew had come to his memory to stay.

Poor snowdrop!

CHAPTER XXIII

"OH, please tell me, Tommy. Dear Tommy, please tell me! If you don't I really think I'll burst." Pammy clasped her hands entreatingly and eyed him with an almost tearful curiosity. "I'll never tell, not even mother!"

"But there's nothing I can tell, Pammy!"

Tommy laughed a little as he sat in the charming old-fashioned drawing-room, up and down the walls of which gorgeously imaged peacocks strutted.

His train leaving Victoria at eight-thirty he had come here to Westminster to get away from the new and as yet almost unbearable misery that had assailed him in the train, and, as on the other occasion, the occasion when he had come with his mind full of absent but kindly plots for the Lansings, he found Pam busy, and Pammy an important substitute for her.

"Nothing you can tell," repeated the young girl sharply, pouncing on the word; "that means that you could but won't. Ah, Tommy, *please!*"

But Tommy shook his head. "I am a tomb; a lock-box; a safety-vault. I never tell secrets," he declared with a mock solemnity that sat ill on his worn face. "You tell *me* things, Pammy dear. How are you all, and *have* you seen 'Peter Pan'?"

"Yes. But I don't much like it. Mother and father have been seven times, and father always cries. I think it rather silly."

"Ah, my dear!"

"Yes, I do. There *are n't* pirates; and children can't do all those things; and there is n't any Never Never Land."

Poor Tommy drew a sharp breath. It seemed to him that the whole future was a Never Never Land — a land whither he could never go, a land where snowdrops grew and Nancy Gilpin had never been Aileen Donovan.

Pammy watched him with the shrewdness that sat so oddly on her fat face.

"You look very seedy," she said at length. "I'll not tease you any more, only I'm sure it's a love-story, and I adore love-stories. Would you like some tea?"

It was only four, but Tommy accepted her offer with pleasure. He was desperately tired, and he liked tea.

Pammy rushed away, the house shaking under her energetic tread, and, left alone, the young man closed his eyes for a time.

It had come, love. He had hoped for it and it had come, but instead of coming as an angel to take him by the hand and guide him through life, behold it was a menace, a terrible danger from which he must flee.

And the pain was almost more than he could bear. Ah, the face of her, the blue gaze of her eyes, the music of her voice!

Mignonette Lady! Poor little Mignonette Lady!

She too was suffering, for she had promised to give Teddy up. - He remembered her voice in Brigit's drawing-room as she said, "I love, I love, I love!" It was indeed a rigid law that had bent him to being cruel to her.

It was cruel and relentless, but even in the midst of his pain he knew it to be law and not caprice, for his was a just mind.

"I must write to Bicky, the darling," he thought suddenly, "but I'll not tell her. It would only make her miserable. I'll say I want sunshine and quiet — and that is true. Poor Bicky, she would understand, but there's no use in hurting her."

Just then Pammy came in bearing a huge silver tea-tray on which stood an array of things the weight of which would have staggered many a grown man.

"I told Williams I'd bring it myself," she announced, quite undisturbed. "She'd have had to bring it in piecemeal, and I'm strong. Oh, matches — have you any?"

She lighted the spirit-lamp and arranged the things on the tray very quietly with her big hands.

"Do you like sponge-cake? There are little chocolate ones, too. Mother will be down in a minute or so. Pilly is ill, poor old thing."

"Who is Pilly? — no, a sponge-cake, please."

"Pilly's mother's old nurse. She's frightfully old —

and frightfully cross, too, though mother adores her. She does n't like me, Pilly does n't, though she used to before mother was married. She's always saying who could believe that I was such a lovely baby — which is nasty of her. Would you like a whisky and soda?" Regarding the young man with an almost ridiculously motherly air the huge girl sat behind the tea-table.

Tommy laughed.

"No, my dear, thank you. I loathe whisky. Why?"

"Well — there's a glass, look at yourself, and you'll know why I want to give you things."

Tommy winced. Only a few hours before he had told *her* to look in a glass, his poor little blighted snowdrop.

"I'm not ill," he said patiently, "I'm only tired."

She nodded. "I know. Well, here's your tea, good and strong. How's Inez?"

Tommy drank a long draught of tea, which was good. "All right — why?"

"Because she was all wrong the day we left. Crying her eyes out. I think she's in love. Mother says I'm always thinking about love, but I'm not, unless other people do. And it seems to me," added the sage of sixteen, munching a chocolate cake with primitive enjoyment, "that most of 'em usually are."

"So you think Miss Lansing's in love?"

"Yes — with Bertie Green. She refused what's-his-name, the guardsman, you know, and the Duchess told

mother yesterday that there must be someone else, and that if it was n't you it must be Mr. Green."

"It certainly is n't *me*," declared Tommy hastily, and as ungrammatical as even an earl could be.

"Then it's him."

Tommy frowned. The friend from Cumberland, then, was Bertie Green himself. "If she loves him why does n't she marry him?" he murmured impatiently.

"Perhaps he has n't asked her."

Pammy was clumsy in her methods, but this time she had hit the mark. This, then, was what Green had meant by his dark hints in the railway carriage!

Tommy sighed. Poor fellow, he had certainly looked miserable enough.

And Inez's face last night, and that morning. Ah yes, misery everywhere. And this was such futile, unnecessary suffering. It would be so easy to make them happy — if only someone would take the trouble.

"She cried *like anything* the other night," resumed Pammy, swallowing more cake than is usually disposed of at once. "My room was next to hers. Funny, is n't it? Now if I were going to fall in love it would be with a big man like Kitchener. More tea?"

But Tommy did not hear. He, it was clear, was the only person who could straighten out this other miserable love-affair. And he had n't much time. "Can you get me a cab?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes, of course — why?"

“Because I must be off. Shall I ring?”

When Mrs. de Lensky came downstairs she found her caller just going.

“Excuse my rushing off like this,” he said, “but I — I have to catch a train.”

She looked at him wonderingly, with her great dark eyes that had once been so beautiful.

“Is anything wrong, Tommy?”

“No — that is, yes. Please don’t tell Brigit, Madame de Lensky. I — I shall be all right.”

Laying her thin hand on his shoulder she continued to look at him, a little whimsical twist to her lips.

“Has it come to you so early, poor Tommy?” she asked, and he knew that in spite of her smile she was not laughing at him.

“Yes, it has come,” he answered truthfully.

“Then,” she said, releasing him, “treat it well, however it has come, and it will not hurt you.”

CHAPTER XXIV

TOMMY went straight to Pomfret Abbey, and, arriving at the middle of dinner, sat down by his sister and said, "I am going back to Italy, Bick, and have come to say good-bye, and to ask a favour of you."

"Back to Italy?"

"Yes, I want the Castelletto — and the sun."

Lady Pontefract looked searchingly at him, and seeing much, said nothing.

Lord Pontefract, on the other hand, seeing nothing, said much. Was the climate too much? Could n't Tommy stand the Bath-tub people any longer? Or was the girl, what 's-her-name — Irene — Iris — making love to him? Or had he fallen in love with her and been refused?

In his rather clumsy way Pontefract was a genial, jocular man, and, liking his queer little brother-in-law, was glad to see him, and did n't want him to feel dull.

"How 'd you get away to-night," he added suddenly, "and why are n't you dressed?"

"I've been in London," returned Tommy, taking a large pale yellow pear and eyeing it absently as it lay on his plate.

Brigit said nothing for a minute, and then, looking

at her husband, remarked quietly, "He has something to tell me, Ponty dear — shall we go?"

Ponty, the soul of good-nature, rose instantly. "No, no, I'll go. Eat your pear, Tommy, and drink a glass of port. Give him some port, Brigit, it'll buck him up. You'll stop the night, Tommy?"

Tommy took up the pear, which looked to him about as eatable as St. Paul's Cathedral. "No, thanks, Ponty, I must be off. I'm leaving to-morrow morning — leaving London, I mean — for Dover. Thanks very much, however."

When the door had closed and the brother and sister were alone he said at once, "Brigit, I must see Inez Lansing to-night."

"Inez!" Lady Pontefract knew her brother well, but for a moment she lost her reasoning power and stared at him in utter dismay. "You don't mean to say ——"

Tommy burst out laughing. "Poor old Bick! No, I most certainly don't mean to say — that. But I must see her. Please don't ask why, it's not my secret."

He looked very ill and very young, and she wanted to take him in her arms and comfort him. But at the same time he looked very resolute and sure of what he wanted, so after a short pause she rose and kissed him.

"I'll telephone her to come over, shall I? Unless you want — but I suppose you don't want to go there."

"No, no. Yes, do ask her to come here. Don't mention me, though, please."

When she had gone, her long amber skirts trailing after her, he sat quite still staring at his pear. It seemed, now that he had done it, a most quixotic and foolish thing, this rush back into the neighbourhood of his danger. And he seemed, in his weariness and discouragement, a mere busybody.

Why could he not let other people manage their own affairs in their own way? Surely Inez Lansing and Hubert Green were not children. Indeed, they were both older than he, and yet here he was playing fairy godfather to them.

He laughed a little mirthless laugh at the thought. And yet — Inez was here — possibly even now crying like anything, as Pammy said, and Green, hurt and proud, had gone back to town to try to forget.

Without his, Tommy's, interference they might be miserable for months, or even forever. And at twenty-three "forever" is a terrific word.

"She's coming, dear," Brigit announced, her hand on his shoulder. "Shall we go to my room?"

He nodded. "Yes. Thank you, Bick. What did you tell her?"

"Only that I wanted to see her. I couldn't hear what she said, except that she'd come."

Together, her beautiful bare arm on his shoulder, they went upstairs into Lady Pontefract's morning-room, a pleasant little room where she sat and read or wrote when alone. The windows were open and

the moonlight lay in great lozenges on the polished floor.

"You are tired out, poor Tommykin. I am glad you are going back to Italy. I will come and see you soon."

He smiled up at her. "Dear old Bicky! Thanks so much for not asking. I'll tell you all about it some day. And," he put his hand on hers, "I — I have been thinking about *him* — the Master. Poor Bick! Life has not been very good to you."

"I — perhaps I was n't good to life, little brother. But I am glad it is nearly over for him now." Her eyes were wet, and he was glad, as she spoke.

They sat down near a window in silence for a long time. Then Lady Pontefract, leaning forward, saw that he had fallen asleep.

Rising, she covered him tenderly with a great fleecy white shawl and closed the window.

It was nearly an hour later when the sound of the Kingsmead motor roused him, and she, switching on the light, folded away the shawl.

"Better?" she asked.

"Yes, dear, much."

Inez Lansing was brought directly upstairs, and when she saw Tommy started back in unaffected amazement.

"Why, Lord Kingsmead," she cried, "what on earth has brought you back here?"

"You," he returned quietly as Brigit closed the door on them.

"Me?" Still enveloped in her furs, the girl stood staring at him. "And where's Nanny?"

"Where's Nanny? What do you mean?" Tommy was very white as he spoke, and he leaned against the back of the chair from which he had risen.

Inez shrugged her shoulders. "Well, I must say you seem to me to be as mad as hatters, all of you. I suppose you know she's gone?"

"No. I did n't know it."

She unfastened her big cloak and slipped it from her shoulders to the floor, her eyes still fixed curiously on his face.

"Well, she has. Teddy is nearly out of his mind about it. He went there this morning at about twelve, and she had left an hour before — for London. He came raging home, swearing you had taken her — going on like a lunatic. It was — awful. Did n't you," she added, "go to London?"

"I did. From Kingsmead station."

"Well, she went from Isherby station, so you went in the same train. Did n't you see her at Victoria?"

"I told you that I did n't know she had gone."

"But you were there this morning," persisted the girl.

He nodded wearily. Her vulgar curiosity as to details, now that he had convinced her of his ignorance of main facts, disgusted him.

"Yes. I was there. But she did not tell me she was going away. Where is Teddy now?"

“At home — behaving abominably. I am glad you are here, for I am sure he would have gone off to Italy to look for you — and her. I suppose you know he wants to marry her.”

Tommy did not answer. He was wondering where poor little Nanny could have gone, and whether she had taken this step to avoid involving him in a more serious quarrel with Teddy. It seemed, this supposing, very likely, and it touched him with great poignancy.

Suddenly the clock struck.

“I am going,” he said, glancing at it, “back to town to-night, so I must waste no time in telling you why I came back. You must forgive my — meddling — I do it for the best. I went up to town this morning with Bertie Green, and — he is very unhappy.”

The girl’s face changed, but she gave her head a little toss. “Unhappy? Poor darling, why?”

“Because,” explained Tommy patiently, “he loves you and you are unkind to him. He thinks you are engaged to what ’s-his-name, Sir Wilfred — and he’s miserable.”

“Really, Lord Kingsmead, I am at a loss to understand ——”

It was the last he ever saw of the young woman’s manner as interpreted by Miss Lansing, for with a wave of his hand Tommy cut her short.

“Don’t. I am in a great hurry, and I am very earnest, and whether or no you think me impertinent,

I must tell you what I think. I think that you love him and are sorry you tormented him. And now," he added with a little smile, "I think you want to cry, and I don't mind if you do."

It was well that he did not mind, for the girl broke down helplessly and sobbed on the satin back of a chair until she could sob no more.

"I did n't want to care for him," she cried, blowing her nose on Tommy's handkerchief, "but — I could n't help it. And — I tried to accept Sir Wilfred, even the Duchess said he was a splendid match — and I loathe his father — Bertie's, I mean, and they have no real social standing ——"

"Oh, *blow* social standing!" interjected Tommy vulgarly.

"I know. You're quite right. And then — I was horrid to him, and — things went from bad to worse, and I have been so miserable, and then to-day he went away without asking me."

"Having blown social standing, my dear Inez, I'd advise you to blow your nose and wipe your streaming eyes, like the carpenter — or was it the walrus? And as to Green, how *could* the poor wretch ask you, with you devilling him for all you were worth?"

"But what can I *do*?" she asked, between a laugh and a final sob. "I can't ask him! Oh, Lord Kingsmead, what must you think of me?"

"I like you better than I ever did, if you really care

to know," returned Tommy honestly; "and as to what you can do, write him a note and ask him to come to see you, and then be commonly decent to him and see what 'll happen!"

"Do you really think so?" she asked incoherently.

"I really do. And now I must be off. Will you take a message to Teddy for me?"

"I 'll do anything on earth for you."

"Well — this is easy. Tell him that I assure him on my word of honour that I do not know where — where Mrs. Gilpin is — and that I have no intention of ever seeing her again. And then, tell him to — to write to me some day."

"Yes. I will tell him. He was — very angry with you."

"I know. Some day he will get over it, and — I shall always be ready to — make up."

"It is very strange," began the girl, but he snubbed her gently.

"Don't be curious. Go home and write to Green."

She put on her coat and held out her hand. "I can't ever thank you," she said, a little catch in her voice. "I *was* so miserable. I suppose Pammy Lensky will call it an aversion to type!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE long journey from Kingsmead to London, from London to Paris, passed to Tommy like a dream.

The channel had been in a very tempestuous mood, and he, a good sailor, was glad, for it to a great extent freed the deck of encumbering people, and he paced up and down in the cold wind, his head bent, his hands in his pockets, undisturbed, among his confused thoughts.

And alas, poor Tommy's thoughts were indeed very confused; for now, having in his queer way done all that he could for other people, he for the first time since the blows had fallen on him, the so curiously united blows, left with no one to care for, not one to whose aid he could come, felt his own personal misery stand out boldly before him.

It had been a relief to hear from Pammy that a friendly hand was needed to steer the uninteresting Inez's little bark into harbour; a comfort to rush back to Kingsmead to show the girl the way to happiness.

But when he had said good-bye to Brigit and got into the motor that was to take him to the station, the closing door seemed to shut in with him, leaving him utterly at its mercy, the unveiled image of his own misery and aloneness.

The road led past Creene, and at the little gateway he touched the button that brought the motor to a stop.

The house was dark but for a light downstairs in the servants' quarters. He got out and in the mild darkness that seemed to hang from the bare trees went up the drive.

The door — *her* door, the windows of the drawing-room, the semicircle of windows of the downstairs lounge — he looked at them all.

Then he went to the door of the walled garden and tried it. It was locked.

This seemed to him appropriate and almost allegorical. The garden was closed to him, and the snowdrop gone. If he asked the servants where she was, he would probably be told, for he felt that they had not been forbidden to tell him. He and she, she believed, of course, were allies, since she "understood."

But he did not ask. He did not wish to know. And with a kind of sob he went back to the motor and started back to the Castelletto.

"My first love," he said in the darkness, "is over."

It was not what he had imagined it would be, that first love. The adoration that should have been its chief component had been cruelly slain at the very moment of his recognition of the love; and gone the adoration, the reverence, the best of the love, had gone too.

What was left was chiefly pain, and pain of a highly complicated and tentacled variety.

Had Nancy Gilpin remained Nancy Gilpin things would not have been nearly so bad, for Tommy knew that he could have forced himself to love her in a way worthy of his friend's wife and worthy of himself. He was bound to have suffered in any case, but it would have been the suffering of a clean wound from a clean blade, whereas this was the festering of an ugly thorn. The thoughts and feelings involved brought the young man clearly face to face with aspects of life that had hitherto troubled him very little, and some of them displeased him.

Love to him meant a beautiful whole; the rose, rooted in the earth, to be sure, but blooming proudly in the purity of the sun and rain of heaven.

And now, with his curious, unanalysed relentlessness of mind, he could not call his crying longing for Nancy Gilpin love.

"I do not love her," he said over and over again, "I just want her." And then the desire to see her dear little face, to hear her voice, tore at him like a demon, so that he groaned aloud.

At Paris, where he could get in the south-bound express no sleeping accommodation, the gods were very good to him, for in his queer way he derived real comfort from the fact that there was in his compartment a young woman, a Greek, with an ailing child. This woman speaking no French at all, and being in deep distress over her husband, to whom she had been called

by news of his sudden illness, was almost helpless in her grief, and on Tommy's addressing her in Italian, of which language she understood a few words, clung to him with a faith that might under other circumstances have been almost embarrassing.

As it was, however, his sympathy for her was a blessing to him, and all night he talked to her, holding the baby for the greater part of the time in his arms, for the little creature seemed to like being with him, and its piteous whining ceased for longer and longer intervals as the train rushed into the morning.

Once Tommy made tea for his companion, for she had a well-equipped tea-basket, which her apparently constitutional helplessness appeared to render quite useless to her; and as they sipped the boiling liquid from the dreadful enamel cups, that looked as if they had been stolen from their chains on some public drinking fountain, he learned much of her history.

Her husband, a civil engineer, had been sent to Paris a year ago, and she had just joined him there. They lived high, very high up in an old house near the Sorbonne — there were iron balconies at the windows, she added vaguely.

And they were happy. The baby was fourteen months old. No, she did n't look so old, for she was very delicate. Her ankles were weak. He was strong and well and big and busy — oh, twice as big as Tommy, she explained, with pride.

And he had been sent to Turin, something about a bridge, a fortnight before. She was very lonely, for she could never learn French. No, he was Italian, a Calabrian. And that afternoon had come the telegramma, — “ah, *io idio telegramma*, I hate them,” — saying he was ill and she must come; and she knew he had been hurt, on the bridge or something, and that she would find him dead.

The baby slept now, its pallid face on the mother’s sealskin muff, and the tea was becoming drinkably cool.

“You *can’t* know,” Tommy declared encouragingly. “You must n’t imagine the worst.”

But she shook her head with a touch of absurd importance even in the midst of her bitter grief. “I do know. *E in famiglia*,” she stumbled in her bad Italian. “When a death comes we have a feeling. It never fails, never.”

Then she wept again, mopping her fussy dark face with a blue-edged handkerchief.

At Modena Tommy took her keys and went and got her luggage through the customs. When he came back he brought her a big packet of milk chocolate, which she ate with deliberate greed, devouring every bit of it in half an hour.

Toward morning Tommy slept for an hour, and woke to find her giving lumps of plum-cake to the baby. This seemed to him unadvisable and he said so, but she assured him that the baby liked it.

At the station before Turin two men got in and discussed the local politics of their town in a loud tone.

Tommy, still grasping at anything that kept his mind away from himself, listened gravely to the story of the misdemeanours of the Sindaco and the Virtues of l'illustrissimo Morro. "She, la Curini, has much to do with the appointment of that imbecile Massimo Terretti," the younger of the two men declared, with a wink; "he is a good-looking youth." And the older man picked his teeth with a gold-mounted goose-quill and answered with a shrug: "My dear Carlo, wherever there is mischief there is a woman, and wherever there is a woman there is mischief! Ah, *le donné!*"

Tommy helped the Greek get out at Turin, and called a porter to carry her luggage, then, wishing that she might find her husband better, he bade her good-bye and got back into his carriage.

The two men had got out too, but to his relief more people got in — a German bride and groom, and an Englishwoman who, he thought, must certainly be a suffragette.

All the way to Genoa, where they arrived at half-past six, the German bride and groom talked — chiefly about the scenery, which they called either *prachvoll* or *grossartig*.

They were a solidly built couple in new snuff-coloured clothes, and both of them wore glasses. Her name was Clotilde and his Arthur, and they ate a great many lunches.

Tommy's German was scant, but he talked to them, and they told him that they were going to Spezia, which they understood was *wunderschön*, and colossally cheap.

They were nice simple souls and he liked them even when they held hands, which showed that he was not insular in his prejudices. The suffragettish-looking lady read Baedeker all the way and ate two buns.

Tommy bought at a station a sausage-roll and then wished he had n't, for the sausage was very garlicky.

Clotilde and Arthur liked Tommy extremely and roared with laughter at his bad German and his jokes, for Tommy was very hilarious.

At Genoa, however, he left them, though they were going on by the same train, and sat huddled by a window of his compartment, his face very white, his unseeing eyes turned toward the moonlit sea.

At last, at the end of a long tunnel, the train stopped and Tommy got out at a small station.

Giving his luggage receipt to a man who hoped his signora was well, he got into a little one-horse victoria and was borne rapidly along one of the most beautiful coast roads in the world towards the Castelletto.

CHAPTER XXVI

IN the quiet of the warm night, a quiet that had a velvety quality unknown to northern climates, the Castelletto lay glowing in warm moonlight. The pleasant pale moon that had shone on Tommy half-a-dozen nights before as he left Kingsmead was not here. This was a glowing globe of gold whose shadows dropped over the still world shadows as light, as distinct as that made by the sun.

And all down the hill, as Tommy sat, a small quaint figure perched on the parapet of his terrace, he saw grey olives asleep in the mellow night, except where broad-stretched firs spread out over the deep border of softly crashing foaming waves that eternally stroked the rough piled rocks. In the interstices of the stoutly built old tower grew prickly-pears, and in one corner of the terrace, near the warm wall of the kitchen, a mass of delicate purple irises stirred as if dreaming.

Tommy was alone, but for his servant, Battista, and Battista, too, slept.

It was the third night since that one when he had come back. He had been alone ever since, alone with himself, and bravely he had faced himself, and his fight was still going on. He was lonely with a horrible loneliness;

sad with a great sadness; young with a cruel youth. But he was his self's grim and uncompromising antagonist, and he was beginning to get the advantage over the arguments and excuses with which his antagonist confronted him.

Easy as he knew it would be for him to find Aileen Donovan, as he was teaching his mind to call her, he knew, had known from the first, that he would never seek her. It was not a determination, it was the conviction of a fact.

He would not seek her; he could not, as yet, forget her; but, quite without any attempt at cynicism, rather as a child holding out a hand in the dark for help he knows, in spite of terror, to be there, he told himself that time cured all things.

It hurt him to think of Nanny cut adrift by her own will, in order to keep her promise to him, from her pleasant anchorage at Creene, but even as it hurt him he remembered with a smile that she was not of the stuff of which renunciation is made. "She will not allow herself to suffer — bodily," he thought.

No doubt, loving Teddy as she did, she would suffer in losing him, but her gay frocks, her big fires, her simple, perfect meals she would never give up.

The money given her by *him* seemed to her quite honourably her own, he knew, and she would never dream of giving it up.

But as he sat there on the broad parapet, on the outer

edge of which grew a narrow bed of rosemary, Tommy was not thinking of Mrs. Gilpin. He was thinking of Brigit — of the story she had told him on just such a night, on that very spot — her story and Victor Joyselle's, that, after all the years, not even his death could quite end. For she still loved him. And realising now, as he had not of course hitherto, through his ignorance, what it meant to her, his heart ached as he thought. What pain for her, too, to have given all the love of her heart to a man she could not marry.

She had told him, that night under the stars, that when Joyselle's shock over his good little wife's death had been dulled by time, he had wished to see her. But she had refused, for she had known then that his love for her was not great enough to satisfy her, and she had her life to lead. "It was *she*, Félicité, whom he loved most," she had told her brother, her hand in his, "and when she was dead — no, I could n't see him."

He knew that the story had caused much talk, something closely approaching a scandal; and he also knew that Brigit had not feared what people might say.

Now, it seemed to him, he understood it all. And — how he loved her, his beautiful Bicky!

As soon — as soon as he could, he decided, he would go back to England and be much with her and try to help fill her empty life. She loved him, and he could at least try to make her happier.

Quite simply he sketched his little plan, and as he sat

there, thinking not of himself, something of his misery seemed to slip from him.

The world too, was huge, and beautiful, and interesting. And people were charming.

As soon — as soon as he could, he would go back to them. But not quite yet. No, for a little while he must be quite alone. Crouching on the parapet he gazed seaward, the fresh warm breeze blowing his soft hair back from his forehead.

Then — a knock at the outer door.

“*Chi è?*” Without waiting for an answer he hurried to the far side of the terrace and looked down through the narrow aperture through which centuries before men had shot at their enemies.

Below him, at the top of the narrow, dangerous flight of stone steps, stood, in the darkness, two figures, one of them a man with a lantern.

“Signore, it is a lady,” and before the lantern light flashed on the face of the lady, as she looked up, he knew.

He went down to the door very quietly, and pushing back the huge rusty bolt, let her in.

She looked at him from under her flat black travelling hat with something like fear in her eyes, but she did not speak until they stood together on the terrace near where he had been sitting.

“I have — come.”

“Yes. And — why?”

She sat down on the parapet and unfastened her

cloak, which, falling back from her shoulders, displayed her little figure dressed in a neat grey tailor-made frock.

"Why have you come?" he repeated quietly.

"Because — because I wanted to see you. Listen."

As once before, her self-possession amazed him, for he could see that she was at the same time very nervous and shy.

"You said I could not marry him. And I went away. But — ah, Tommy, it is because I love you that I have come. You love me, I know." Anxiously she watched him.

"Then," he asked sternly, "why did you try to marry him?"

She clasped her hands. "Don't scold me. *He* wanted me, and you did n't. And I liked him, and — it all began before you came. I — and then loving you made me more lonely, and — you did n't care, Tommy!"

Tommy faced her in silence for a moment.

"And — you said I was not fitted for him," she went on — "as his wife — and you are more than he — and the other day I — I knew that you loved me. So — I have come."

"Ah, don't, don't!" he cried, "I never told you so. You must not say so."

"But you do. I have known it ever since the day you came to tell me I could n't marry him. But I thought I *could*. Marry him, I mean. And — when you made me see I could not — well, I love you, so I

have come. I do not want you, you know," she added, very reasonably, "to marry me."

Tommy's eyes filled with hot tears that did not fall. Ah, the piteous humility of her!

"Tommy — I was going to marry him because, though you say I am bad, I don't like being not a real self. And I liked him and I could have helped him and been somebody — a real person. Then you came ——" she leaned toward him until her shoulder touched his, almost to his undoing, although even at the moment he acquitted her of any attempt at vulgar seduction.

"You do love me," she added, not as a question.

Then he spoke in a queer voice that he could not make like his own:

"You must go. I am sorry you have come. I will send my man down to the town with you — or no, on to Sant 'Elena, where there are good hotels."

"You will not send me away!"

There was deep agony in her voice, and her small pure face quivered as she looked at him. "Not that, not that! Let me stay — as your friend — however you like. But I cannot go."

"You must."

"Then — you do not love me."

Tommy clasped his hands tight. "If I do," he said roughly, "it is not in the right way. Oh, go, go, go!"

For she was lovely in the moonlight, and he was twenty-three.

"I will give back the money," she faltered, obviously bringing herself to the greatest sacrifice of which she could conceive, "and — the house."

"You must go. And — please go soon."

Leaving her he crossed the terrace and knocking on a small curtained window by the iris bed waked his servant. "Dress, Battista, and light a lantern. You must take this lady back to Sant 'Elena. You can wake Giacomo to drive you on."

"*Si, signore*; is the lady going by the one-o'clock train?"

Tommy hesitated for a moment and then said firmly, "Yes. She is going to Florence."

When he came back to where she stood he told her in a gentle voice to sit down. "You heard?" he asked as she, without resisting, obeyed.

"Yes, I am going to Florence."

They were both silent for a moment, and then she said, "I will never see you again, Tommy. Are you sure?"

"Yes — ah yes, poor dear," he answered, "I am sure. We are both sure. As to — my caring — the snowdrop," he touched his breast, "is here. But — it has to be."

The servant, a handsome middle-aged man with the dignity of carriage that so clearly reminds one of the ancientness of Italian civilisation, came out of his room, a lighted lantern in his hand. After seeing by Tommy's

turning that he was seen, he quietly went down the steps and closed behind him the outer door.

“If — if I had n’t done that,” she said, “you would have married me?”

There was much dignity in the humble question, and Tommy recognised it.

“Yes,” he said simply, “but don’t think of that. And now — good-bye.”

He took her small hand and held it between his for a moment, and to his surprise she read his thoughts. “If I had been — really — all right, I could not have done it — you mean that. It is me, not what I have done.”

“Don’t think me a prig,” he cried with youthful terror of that bugbear among faults.

But, her great blue eyes full of tears, she bent and kissed his thin wrist. “I love you,” she whispered, “so I obey you. Will you keep this and sometimes think of me?”

From under her cloak she brought the silver mirror, and put it into his hand.

“I will keep it. Yes. Now good-bye.”

For a moment they looked at each other, and then she left him and went down the steps, without turning.

He, the glass in his hand, stood on the parapet above the path looking after her as she went, following through the olives the dancing round light of the lantern.

The moonlight shed, as it fell through the olive-trees, lacy shadows about her, and he could see that her head

was bowed. He did not think that she was crying; she was not a tearful woman, just as she was not a rebellious one.

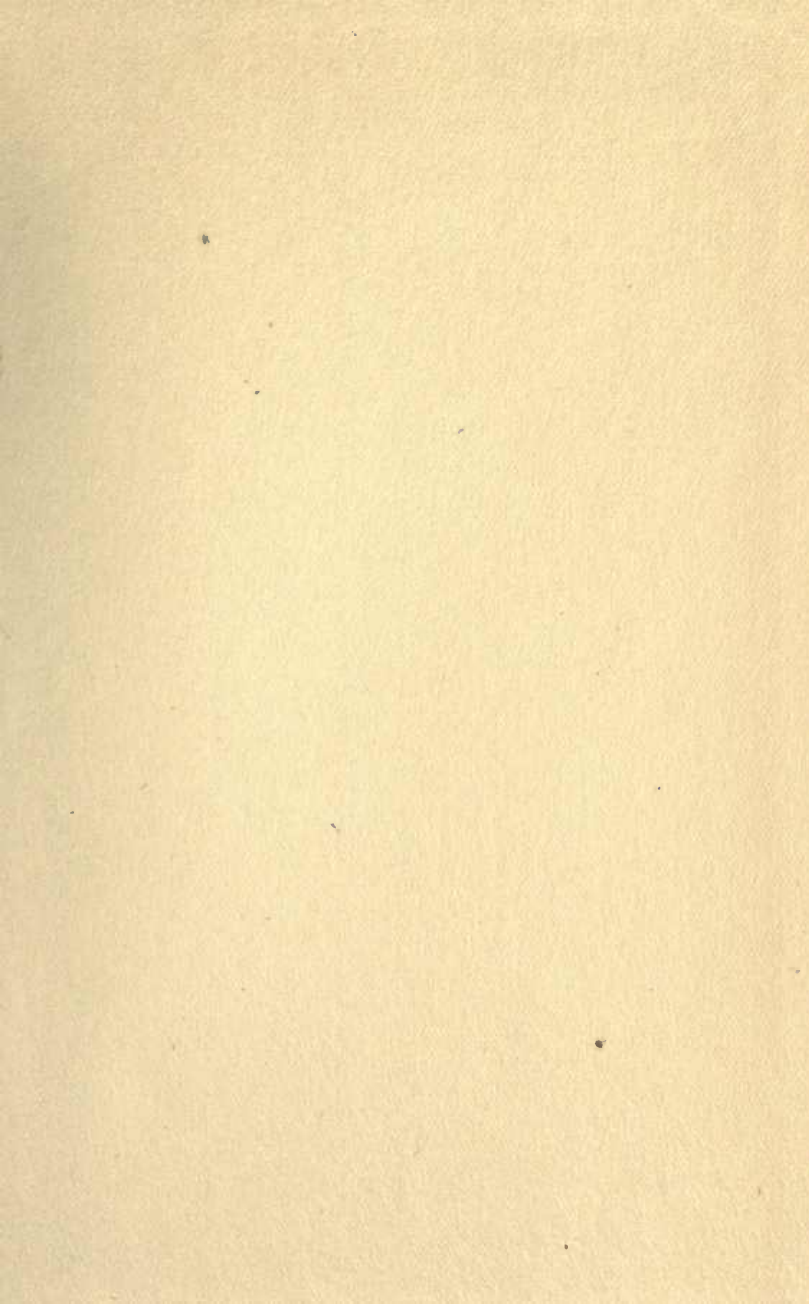
Her extraordinary step in following him to the Castelletto was, he knew, very indicative of her gentle courage, but her quiet departure without a scene, without any display of passion or resentment, was as characteristic.

She had gone and he would not see her again.

This he knew. She had accepted his decision, and she was gone. The lantern bobbed in and out, down the steep path, and he still could see her little figure pathetically following it — then at a sharp turning it was gone.

After five minutes or so he saw again the bobbing light, but it was among thick-set fir-trees now, and the moonlight could not penetrate them. He no longer saw her.

At last he drew a deep breath, and walking slowly back to the sea-front, knelt by the parapet, and putting the little mirror down on the rough stones between his outstretched arms, laid his cheek against it.



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